Chrome Shelled Regios Volume4

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These are novel illustrations that were included in volume 4

鋼殻のレギオスⅣ
コンフィデンシャル・コール

二人は出会った。それはあらかじめ決められていたことかのように――。
「ヴォルフシュテイン、この程度か？」
少年は囁くように言う。
「サリンバン教導傭兵団……」
剄の力を加速的に飛躍させる違法酒密輸事件を捜査していたツェルニ都市警察とレイフォンは、偽造学生証を保持した集団に遭遇する。
その中に、少年――ハイアがいた。
グレンダンが誇る最強傭兵集団の三代目団長であるという彼がなぜここに？
さらに違法酒捜査の手はツェルニの生徒にまで及び、それがいくつもの運命のいたずらを引き起こすことになる……。
最強学園ファンタジー、第四弾！

鋼殻のレギオスⅣ
コンフィデンシャル・コール
雨木シュウスケ

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富士見ファンタジア文庫

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少女は巨人と踊る

少女は聖霊と歌う

少女は蒼剣と語る

少女は世界と歩む

そして少女は慈しむ

鋼殻のレギオス

サイレント・トーク

センチメンタル・ヴォイス

コンフィデンシャル・コール

鋼殻のレギオスⅣ
コンフィデンシャル・コール

「上等さ～。
刀も使えない腑抜けな技がおれっちに通用するか、
試してみたらいいさ～」

「今度は手加減しない……」

ずっと、
あんな日が続くと
思っていた……

Prologue

As the signal sounded, the still air vibrated as if an explosion hit the air. Sharnid rushed out like the rapids of a river, moving swiftly but cautiously. The gun in his hand made no sound.

If he didn't make noise, then no one else would discover his location.....That was Sharnid's current mission. He carried it out loyally. There was meaning in being true to a mission. The members of the other platoon were constantly on the lookout for Sharnid, especially the Psychokinesist, who had sent out his flakes to fly back and forth in the field. Sharnid kept moving forward as he evaded detection. The tension inside him felt like something hard in his stomach, bursting to escape.

The anxiety that he was suppressing ran through all his nerves. If he made a noise here.....The unnecessary thought bounced off every corner of his mind.

Ignoring that thought for the future, he concentrated on the mission and smoothly arrived at his position. He maintained his cover, hiding from the opposing platoon's members and Psychokinesist as he quietly increased the flow of his Kei to strengthen his vision.

He could have located his enemies through the Psychokinesist on his team, but his own intuition and feelings were the most reliable when accidents occurred. Relying on a Psychokinesist meant making time for redundant communication, slowing

everything down. Speed was extremely important in a fight between Military Artists. One must eliminate what could be eliminated.

In a split second, Sharnid poured Kei into his bullet, as if the Kei had been solidified. Inside the bullet compartments were anesthetic bullets. One of the bullets was covered with Kei. Once the trigger was pressed, the Kei covering that red bullet would transform – it'd become flame-like, expand, explode into flames, and the Kei bullet would shoot forth.

Sharnid would feel all that in one swift moment. Now all he was doing was waiting for that moment to come, as the fight in the middle of the field began.

He saw the golden flowing hair that was his comrade - Dalshena Che Matelna. She wielded a huge lance as she moved, moved like a wild river, like an arrow leaving its bow.

A golden river roaring wild. That was all Sharnid could compare her with as he watched her curly hair draw numerous whirls about her. She ran forward, leading her teammates and drowning her enemies along the way.

Sharnid and one other person existed to keep that river overflowing – Dinn.

Sharnid's mission was to cut through the obstacles attempting to stop the flow of that current, Dalshena, and Dinn's goal was to extend the path that Sharnid made.

He pulled the trigger. Having confirmed the Psychokinesist's information with his own eyes, Sharnid fired the Kei bullet at the enemies that were suddenly cutting in to attack Dalshena. One of the three enemies fell. Dinn finished off the other two. He was as close to them as if he were their shadow.

After covering for Dalshena, Sharnid stood up to change his position. The Psychokinesist in his team informed him of approaching enemies. Even without that information, Sharnid would have to move since he had exposed his position. This already had reduced his chance of making a hit next.

Before he changed position, he glanced at Dalshena, who was dashing forward. She'd enter a fight with the defending members of the enemy team soon. That was when she could demonstrate her true potential. Sharnid must not slack off before she reached her destination. His mission was to lead her to the place where her potential could shine. He must move swiftly. Sharnid watched her back.

(We must win today.)

Following her gaze to the enemy's flag, Sharnid quickly moved, propelled by a natural feeling to hurry up.

It had been one year since then.

Chapter 1: Her idea

"There's no way I'll do it, got that?"

Naruki pulled him up while Layfon was taking a nap on the library lawn in the morning.

Students were in holiday mode while Zuellni mined selenium. The Student President said the mining would take one week to finish at its earliest. Mechanical students dug up the selenium using heavy machines. Volunteers and students from other areas undertook supporting roles, resulting in a lack of senior year teachers, so the academy had temporarily closed.

Layfon had just returned from his shift at the Mechanical Department and was planning to nap a little on the library lawn before the library opened. Yesterday, Meishen and her friends had suggested a schedule for him during Zuellni's break. He had wanted to return to the dormitory and sleep, then change clothes and come over, but.....that seemed too troublesome, so he had laid down on the lawn with his backpack as his pillow. When he came to, Naruki already had him in her grip and was pulling him up.

"Eh? Eh?" he looked around, not sure what was happening.

Why was Naruki so angry? Meishen and Mifi stood behind her with confused expressions. It seemed even they didn't know the reason behind Naruki's actions.

"Um.....What's wrong?"

"It was Layton, right? What you said to the captain."

"Ha?"

This was getting more confusing.

"I don't know what you said.....But I don't agree with it."

".....I'm sorry. I don't understand what you're saying."

".....Wasn't it Layton?" she let go of his collar.

"Just what is it?"

The usually calm Naruki was worked up about something.

"The captain. Your captain came to me yesterday night at the office."

".....Ah, Aah."

"So it really was you!?"

"No, I didn't say anything. No. Maybe I did say.....ah, wait, wait . I said it because the captain wanted my advice. She noticed you before that," Layfon said hastily and prevented Naruki from grabbing his collar again.

"Why?"

"How should I know?"

Naruki groaned with an "urg." Layfon finally felt fully awake.

"Uh.....I have no idea what just happened," Mifi raised her hand .

"What's going on?" Meishen asked.

".....I was scouted by Layton's captain," Naruki replied bitterly.

".....Eh!" the two girls said, shocked.

To put it simply, Nina had finally taken action. It looked like she was planning to add a new team member before the 17th platoon's camp. The team was in a crisis in the last investigation mission due to a lack of members. Nina had already said earlier that she was searching for more members.

Layfon didn't know which part of Naruki had attracted Nina's attention, but since Nina had asked him about her, she'd probably talk it over with Naruki herself in the future.

"This is troublesome," Naruki said as she read the newspaper in the library's study room. "I don't plan to become a platoon member ."

"Yeah, I think so too, but....."

Nina probably won't give up.

The weakness of the 17th platoon was glaringly obvious. It only had just enough members to become a platoon. The maximum number of fighting members was seven, the minimum four. They

could manage if the team was on the offensive in a match. As long as the captain, Nina, remained standing, then the team wouldn't have lost. Layfon and Sharnid just needed to do better when the enemies were focusing on Nina.

But when the team was on the defensive, the difference in numbers became critical. One person would have to stay back to guard the flag, leaving only three people to move freely. It'd be good for the team if their number increased by even just one person. However, students who were good enough to become platoon members had already been netted by other platoons. Even if there were some left, no senior students were willing to join a team made up of juniors. Hence, Nina had changed her targets to year 1 and 2 students.

And Naruki was chosen.....

"I'm already with the City Police. I'm sorry, Layton, but I don't have time to serve in a platoon too."

"Yeah – I know."

There must be a way to resolve this.....But things weren't that simple. Either way, Nina was the type to put her thoughts in action. Her enthusiasm was amazing. It seemed impossible to stop her once she'd made a decision.

"What's so bad about it? Join," Mifi said, already tired of this topic.

"Don't say that as if this has nothing to do with you."

"Huh – Why? Layton's joined a platoon and he works at the Mechanical Department. Isn't that captain also working like Layton? I don't think you can't do it."

"It would be OK if this were just about whether I could do it or not, but I don't want to do things halfheartedly. I'm not as competent as Layton, and I don't have that kind of strength."

Layfon smiled bitterly at that comparison. Though he didn't think he was that competent, he couldn't deny his true strength. Possessing excelling skills in Military Arts, he was given the title Heaven's Blade successor back at Grendan. Now that he had given up on Military Arts in Zuellni, yet still entered the Military Arts course, he could only respond to Naruki's comparison with a " never mind."

He hadn't given up on finding a path besides Military Arts. Zuellni's situation had forced him to delay his search. That was all.

"No matter what, Layton, please convey my intentions to your captain."

"......I'll try," he said, suppressing his thoughts. In the end, this conversation distracted him from concentrating on the next period. After eating Meishen's lunch, they chatted about trivial matters. The four of them parted ways when it was time to leave. Layfon said bye to the three girls and headed for the training complex.

The temperature wasn't as cold at night anymore. During the day, Layfon would sweat a bit in his uniform. It seemed the city had entered someplace hot. Zuellni had stopped for the Selenium

mine. The temperature might get even higher when the city resumed its journey.

Layfon lifted his head to look at the sun, then entered the training complex.

The complex was originally very spacious. It was now divided into numerous rooms. These rooms were built with soundproof materials that nevertheless shook with the impact of training. Layfon entered the training room for the 17th platoon.

The other training rooms were noisy as if a war were going on, but in here, it was very quiet.

Very peaceful.

"Morning."

The sound of doh, doh, doh rebounded in the room. It was natural for Nina to get here even earlier than Layfon. She was hitting numerous hard spheres off the wall with her iron whips.

"Morning," Nina replied as she hit back all the balls that rebounded from the wall.

"I saw Naruki."

"......Ah," she replied, distracted. A ball crashed on the wall behind her. The ball was hit with the Kei of a Military Artist. It didn't slow down, but rebounded off the wall to attack Nina. Nina avoided it and once again struck it with her iron whip.

"I got blamed," Layfon said as he restored his Dite. The green blade shone under the light. He checked his body condition by letting the internal Kei run through his body. Nina struck the balls at Layfon. All of them.

Layfon hit them all back with his sword.

"I didn't think she'd hate it to that level," she said in surprise, as she hit back the balls.

They struck the balls at each other while continuing the conversation.

"Why did you have to meet her at the office?"

"I said before that I noticed her, right? Besides, the limit's almost here."

"Limit?"

"The Military Arts Competition.....the fight between cities. We still haven't received notice?"

"Oh, I see."

Although the Academy City Alliance set down and managed the rules for the fights between Academy Cities, humans didn't get to decide on when a Competition was to be held. The City's consciousness made that decision. Until the day of the fight, no one was able to predict just when it would happen.

"The referee from the Alliance hasn't yet showed up, but there are many cases of cities holding competitions without a referee. I think it's about time."

"Why?"

"Because of the selenium mines. If we lost after the competition, we couldn't even resupply, so isn't this the best time to have a match?"

"I see. That's true. If we're to fight, it would be best to do so in our best condition."

"Exactly. For cities to meet each other, they must move from their territories. That means resupplying is necessary."

Having listened to her, Layfon now truly felt the harsh reality of the Military Arts Competition. If they lost in this Competition, Zuellni would have lost its one and only selenium mine. What awaited it was a slow death. In that case, Layfon would face his second move. Though he could start fresh by moving out of Zuellni, he couldn't ignore the Competition. Because he had met Nina here, as well as Felli, Meishen, the members of 17th platoon and everyone in his classes. He'd have lost the time he could have spent with these people in Zuellni.

After he left Grendan, he hadn't had the opportunity to meet with the children at the orphanage, and he could only communicate with Leerin through letters. He couldn't let his meeting with everyone in Zuellni end like that.

"Even with a new person, our team still has a gap in strength. Let's just leave the question of whether our strength can catch up or not. It's too late to start training for our own particular positions in the match."

The conversation returned to Naruki. Nina missed the ball again. The ball rebounded off the wall and flew underneath her armpit in a direction that Layfon's sword couldn't reach.

"Hey!"

The ball flew straight for Sharnid's face. He had just opened the door to the room.

"Uh-oh!" he just managed to dodge it. The ball bounced off the wall in the corridor.

"This game again? You two are enthusiastic," he said, grabbed hold of the ball jumping back and forth in the narrow corridor and brought it back into the room.

"Come join us."

"Then Felli-chan would join too, and we'll see the scene of hell like last time."

"If I lose, I'll treat you to dinner. How about that?"

Surprised at Nina's unusual provocation, Sharnid joined in.

"Pretty good."

He restored two of the three Dites from his weapon harness. They were guns made in black alloys and they looked quite heavy. One glance showed they were made for close combat. Although Sharnid was a sniper, he had had training in close quarters gun combat. His participation in the game made the bouncing of the balls more intense.

The rules were simple. One would get a black mark against him for failing to hit back a ball or hitting back a ball with a large margin of error in terms of direction. The person accumulating the most number of points in the time limit lost. The time limit was the time till training hour ended.

It wasn't as simple as hitting back a ball. Because everyone included feints in their actions, this made the timing of the hit difficult.

Felli entered as Sharnid was starting to warm up. She wasn't willing to join in, but in the end accepted Nina's proposal.

"The one who will lose is probably captain or senpai," she said lightly and restored her Dite. Flakes in the shape of flower petals scattered in the air in response to her power of Psychokinesis.

The flakes were like a part of Felli's body, and their uses weren't limited to just sensing. Some used the flakes to attack and some used them to defend. Hitting back the hard balls wasn't a problem to Felli at all.

"Hey now, is it OK to say that?"

"Yes. I can't lose to you two."

As Sharnid and Nina conversed, they gave each person five hard balls.

"Ready?" Nina said, and the twenty hard balls went into a rampage, drawing out the picture of a hellish scene. Sharnid called it a game, but it was a very proper and formal type of training. Layfon was the one to suggest this type of training. Nina had then brought in a large number of hard balls.

Training with the balls scattered on the floor helped to increase the basis of internal Kei. As for today, hitting the balls back and forth trained reflexes and also increased coordination. When that reached a certain level, one could even use Kei to hit a ball and cancel the Kei of someone else. This way, one could also increase one's basic skill in external Kei. There were many different types of skills in the use of internal and external Kei, but if one managed to master the basics, then one could better adapt them. Compared to spending a large amount of time learning a new skill in Kei, it was better to increase the level of the basics first..... that was Layfon's suggestion, and Nina found it plausible.

When training ended, it was already sunset.

"Next time, I'll....." Nina said with regret as she stared at the menu in the restaurant.

Layfon got zero, Felli three points, Sharnid twelve points and Nina thirteen points..... Nina lost by just one point.

"......I'll pay half. How does that sound?" Layfon asked.

"No need," she replied.

Nina's family was rich, but she didn't get any financial support here because she came to Zuellni against her parents' wishes. Layfon wasn't sure how she paid for her school fees, but all her living expenses were paid by the money she earned at the Mechanical Department.

"Layfon, it's forbidden to sympathize with the loser," Sharnid said smugly and patted Layfon's shoulder. His attitude and wordings declared him a victor.

"Damn, just a little bit more....."

"That little point determined the win and loss. This world is cruel."

"That's the truth. Ah, I want that," Harley said, looking at his menu. He was sitting next to Nina.

"......Hang on, I didn't say I'll treat you."

"Huh? Is that so?"

"Of course. If you're not satisfied, then fight me."

"No way. I can't win against a Military Artist."

"Then you can't."

"Tsk, never mind," Nina's childhood friend, the 17th platoon's Dite Mechanic, moved his gaze to Layfon indifferently. "Layfon, I've finished the simple version of what we talked about before. Can you drop by tomorrow? I want to run a final check."

"Ah, sure."

"Ah, What was it? Is it that ridiculous thing from before?"

"The Adamantium Dite. This time I made the simpler version. It's lighter than before."

"That means Layfon'll gradually turn monstrous."

"That's right."

"No, saying monstrous....."

"Monstrous, don't you agree? Normally speaking, it's impossible to imagine a person fighting a filth monster alone."

"Perhaps, but....."

"Thanks to you, we've done something out of the ordinary."

Layfon was troubled by them, as Sharnid and Harley started chatting about it.

"But we won't make that reckless move a second time," Nina said firmly to him.

Everyone had placed their orders. The dishes were spread out before them.

"Speaking of which, did Layfon come up with the training with the balls?"

"No, it was.....the Director." (Derek)

Sudden footsteps sounded near their table, interrupting the conversation.

".....Oh?"

".....Uh?"

Sharnid lifted his head. The closing footsteps ceased.

"Yo, Dinn."

"......You seem in high spirits," the man at the front of the group said. He was bald, small and lanky. He wasn't that thin, one could tell just by looking at him. He had a very sharp looking gaze. A badge with the number 10 was pinned on his uniform. The badge of a platoon.

Sharnid had called him Dinn.

(Uh, seems to be......)

Nina searched her mind for the name of this platoon member. Dinn Dee. The captain of platoon 10. The male students behind him all bore the same badge. They must be his teammates.

"I suppose. Did you see my active performance?"

"I've confirmed through the video. As usual, your first shot was brilliant, but not the second one."

"What harsh advice."

"......The concentration of my team is much better since you left."

"Hahaha, that's good. How's Shena?"

"......Sharnid," Dinn placed his hand on the table. Sharnid's expression changed slightly.

"You're not our comrade anymore. Don't act so close."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Sharnid's words easily defused the anger in Dinn's words. Layfon noticed how Dinn wasn't too pleased with that.

"My next opponent is your 17th platoon. Sharnid, I'll show you that you don't have a place in platoon ten."

"Good luck," Sharnid waved. Dinn and his teammates left quickly. The back of Dinn's bald head had turned red from anger.

"......He's still the same octopus as always," Sharnid said to Dinn's back.

"Bu." At Sharnid's words, Harley couldn't help but spill the drink in his mouth.

"Sharnid was in team ten last year," Felli told Layfon on the way back to the dormitories. Their dormitories lay in the same direction , so unless something special came up, the two of them usually went back together.

"Sharnid and Dinn, and the vice-captain, Dalshena. They were all in first year. When they worked together, their team had the number 1 assault power. The 10th platoon exceeded the first platoon in its excellence."

"But senpai left the team."

Layfon didn't have to hear the answer from Felli. If Sharnid hadn't left the 10th platoon, then his existence in the 17th platoon would not be possible.

"Yeah. He left in the middle of a platoon match."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure, but the performance record of team 10 has gone downhill from then. Even now, it only ranks somewhere in the middle."

This was neither the problem of the three team members being unable to join hands nor that of the team losing one member. This was the collapse of a team combination, a fatal strike at the trust between team members. That was the main reason that caused the slip in the performance record of the 10th platoon.

In the end, the relationship between Sharnid and Dinn was like fire and water.

"I'm certain something's happened between the three of them. I don't know what, but if it's better not to know about it, then I'd rather remain in the dark."

"True," Layfon agreed.

They didn't know what had happened, but Layfon felt that Sharnid would tell them if the time to tell came. Although Sharnid was always flippant with an attitude of ignorance, he was able to make wise judgments in critical moments.

It wasn't something that words could convey.

Layfon knew just by looking at Sharnid's performance in the platoon match. Senpai cut off his presence through his Kei, moved to the position where he was needed and fired the fatal shot at the right timing. A person's true self was revealed while he fought. The perfect sniper was Sharnid's true face. That was a part of him that no one was able to feel in his usual daily life.

"Really?" It seemed Felli didn't agree with Layfon's opinion.

"He's got the skill, but his personality is beyond help."

"Not at all. I can rest assured with senpai here."

"......As I said before."

"Sen.....Felli's Psychokinesis feels different," Layfon made a hasty change in his address of Felli when she glared at him.

"What type of feeling is it?"

"As if my senses have been opened."

"Of course, I'm a Psychokinesist."

The mission of a Psychokinesist was to gather information in the match and convey that information to their teammates. Another duty was to facilitate communication between team members.

"A Psychokinesist is their teammates' eyes and ears, but I didn't mean that.....What's wrong?"

"Ah, no. Nothing."

Felli seemed to have changed recently. She still hadn't been participating in training enthusiastically, but the atmosphere she exuded that caused people to dislike her wasn't as strong as before.

If it had been the Felli before, she wouldn't have said a word about the bet in the training room. As a Psychokinesist, she'd never have spoken confidently about her own ability before Nina and Sharnid. However, she still hated her own ability, and that was the present Felli.

Even so, Felli had changed.

(Why?)

Felli had shown her weaker side a few days ago in the destroyed city. She was unable to give up being a Psychokinesist, unable to calm down without using her abilities. This implied that she had no way of discontinuing being a Psychokinesist. She looked depressed because of it.

Layfon didn't know how to help Felli either. He also was experiencing the same problem as her. He couldn't give up his identity as a Military Artist, not because of Karian's discovery of his past, but because he couldn't calm himself down when he didn't use Kei.

He didn't know what to do about it. Since he also faced the same problem, he could only accompany Felli and chat with her.

"What is it?" Felli glared at him, dissatisfied with his silence.

"No. Really, nothing."

He wanted to know just exactly how she had changed, but he didn't voice it. Perhaps Felli would talk about it when the time came.

Layfon decided to end the day like that since he didn't have work tonight. He planned to lock the door of his room and nap a while in the bath, but the security guard came over while he was locking the door, telling him there was a phone call for him.

He had no choice but to leave his dormitory once more.

The call was from Formed Garen, the Head of City Police, Naruki's boss.

"I'm sorry about this," Formed said in greeting, wearing a pretty sly expression.

The location was the outskirts of Zuellni. The City Police were all wearing heavy armor. They had fenced off the shops. Formed was holding something that looked like an explosive type weapon. The other Military Artists were all waiting for something with tense expressions.

"This weapon is for suppression purposes," he lifted the cylinder shaped weapon with a bitter smile. "I'm not good at using this. I hope we can avoid a fight if possible."

"What's it today?" Layfon said. The tension around Formed was extremely high. This felt unusual.

"It seems there are a huge number of fake students here."

"Fake students?"

"People who came with fake student documentations and pretended to be students of Zuellni."

"There are such people....." Layfon's eyes widened, hearing this for the first time.

"Sometimes we do have people who want to learn but can't afford the fees, but our student IDs are renewed every year. The library has a record of all incoming and exiting students. They keep the record for about a year or so."

"Ha....." Layfon didn't know about it at all.

"Try imagining."

"Can't."

"Just cause you don't feel like imagining. It takes lots of money to produce fake identities. Isn't it a waste to just pretend to be a student?"

"Then for what?"

"Anything that's outside the purpose of gaining knowledge, such as illegal drugs, buying and selling illegal wines, stealing intelligence.....things like that."

"I see."

"This time it's about illegal wines. Have you heard of 'DG'?"

"The drug used to accelerate the production of Kei?"

The discovery that the product of fermenting a certain genetically modified fruit could cause an unusual reaction to a Kei vein was made before Layfon's birth. It was once commonplace among many cities because its use could increase the power of Kei in Military Artists and Psychokinesists exponentially.

"If it didn't have side effects, it would be something that all Military Artists would dream of having."

Yes, this wine had its side effects. The unusual flow of Kei vein was abnormal. It increased chances of developing malignant tumors by 80%, causing numerous Military Artists and Psychokinesists to become useless. As such, each city had set down laws banning the production and importation of the wine according to its judgment. This wasn't a result of a meeting between cities, but it came about because of fear. Even so, not all cities had set down such measures, hence the method of production wasn't lost.

There were Military Artists who didn't have the confidence to face their current level of strength. There were those people who wished for such a drug, not willing to face failure in battle. There were also people who sold such illegal drugs at a high price.

".....They want to import it into the Academy City and store it up?"

"That depends on the timing. Perhaps they think this small and insignificant city has need of it? Maybe our Student President has already sent people over to buy the stuff," Formed said with a cold smile. A joke that wasn't funny at all.

Layfon confirmed the shop again. The message on the sign showed the shop sold water guns, a fairly popular sport in many cities.

"Are they hiding in there?"

"Yeah, we've confirmed the presence of ten fake students. I'm not sure.....if there are any military artists."

"There are."

"As I thought.....Can you tell?"

Layfon's hand naturally reached out to his weapon harness. He wasn't surprised at Formed's information.

"Yeah.....and they're provoking me."

Those people weren't even hiding their presence. The Kei they were releasing covered the entire shop. The Kei opposite the opened door swept through Layfon in intense waves. Layfon canceled out their Kei with his own.

"The movements of Military Artists on our side are slow, so I called you over with that suspicion. And you were right where I wanted, which was great."

Even though Formed and his team couldn't see the Kei with their eyes, they could still feel it in the atmosphere. Seeing how relieved Formed was, Layfon once more focused his attention on the shop.

They were veterans, Military Artists whose power was way beyond the group of thieves Layfon had encountered previously. Surrounded on all sides, these guys exhibited the attitude "just come if you dare." This insolence.....provoked Layfon's Kei and aroused his fighting spirit.

"Leader.....We've surrounded the building," Naruki said.

"Good, then....."

".....They're coming," Layfon interrupted.

"Huh?"

A sudden explosion.....behind the speechless Naruki.

"Uwah!" Formed fell, blown by the waves of Kei. The door was blown off its hinges to fly towards them. Naruki moved swiftly to defend Formed, whereas Layfon.....

"Don't get carried away," he restored the Dite he had pulled out of his weapon harness. The sword cut through the door in the middle.

On the other side was.....

"!"

Layfon blocked the attacker's strike with his sword. The owner of the assaulting Kei laughed in the air. A one-sided sword..... katana. The material was also steel alloy. Derek flashed through Layfon's mind.....and quickly disappeared.

The face beneath the attacker's nose was covered by a mask. Red hair bounced in the air as if it was firing up the darkness of the night. Male, a young man.....He looked to be about the same age as Layfon.

"Don't think you can escape!"

"Damn, go in! Go in!" came Formed's shout from behind.

Layfon chased after the young man. The attacker sped on the roads and jumped from rooftop to rooftop without any unnecessary movements. He was extremely fast.

"Heh."

If Layfon kept on chasing, this might take quite a while. He gathered the Kei at the soles of his feet.

Internal Kei variation – Whirl Kei.

The next moment he was right behind his target, swinging down with his sword. He aimed for the shoulder of the weapon arm. He'd smash the bone so the guy couldn't use his weapon anymore and surrender.

That was his intention at least.

"Wha!?"

His target had dodged the attack.

The young man stood at someplace higher than Layfon's current location. He seemed to have timed Layfon's attack.

(Damn.)

If this guy escaped.....but the price of using Whirl Kei had left Layfon with the only choice of moving in a straight line now. This guy would have escaped while Layfon tried to stop his headlong rush.

"That was pretty dangerous."

A feeling of something expanding came from above Layfon's head. Layfon turned in midair to face his attacker. The young man

readied his pose, also in midair, his body surrounded by Kei. As his foot landed on the wall of a building, he suddenly disappeared.

At the same time, Layfon was attacked on all sides.

Internal type Kei variation – Fleeting Shadows.

"What!"

Shocked, he swung at his right. The crisp sound of metal clashing against metal rang out, and the heavy impact ran up Layfon's arm. As Layfon hadn't yet stopped his headlong rush, the impact of that strike sent him flying backward.

"As expected, you can read my moves."

The eyes of the young man sparkled with joy.

Layfon blocked the consecutive attacks with his sword. The young man was attempting to stop him from braking his headlong rush. As Layfon moved, his weapon clashed numerous times with the young man's. Each strike from his attacker was heavier than the previous strike. As they exchanged blows, Layfon was prevented from changing his direction.

"Ha!"

"!"

The young man's strike went from low to high and Layfon reacted by leaping up. As his flying momentum reached its peak, he finally managed to slow himself down. He confirmed his location in the air.

He was still in the outskirts of the city, moving along Zuellni's outer area. This was the practicum area of the Construction course. Nobody was around at night. One could say it didn't matter if you destroyed the buildings here.

(Good.)

He increased the density of Kei running through his body, and swung downward at the young man following him from below.

External Kei – Whirl Kei.

Kei in the form of a twisting whirl embedded with Kei bullets spun towards the young man. The young man raised his katana in the direction of the air flow and struck down every single Kei bullet. In the sound of successive explosions, Layfon charged his opponent.

"Too naive!"

The young man received Layfon's strike. The two types of Kei joined together, then rebounded off each other in all directions. Sparks flew off the Dites and lit up the young man's face. The left side of his face that wasn't masked was carved with a tattoo.

"Wolfstein.....is only at such a level?"

Words that were like the rumbling of thunder to Layfon.

At the same time, Layfon felt something wrong with his sword.

"Ha!"

Internal type Kei – Fleeting shadow.

As the young man leaped up for high speed movement, he scattered the Kei gathered at that one single point against Layfon's Kei. Layfon confirmed the sword in his own right hand. The flow

of Kei had turned clumsy. He watched more closely and saw a number of small dents in the blade.

External type Kei – Rot.

His sword had been damaged.

When he realized something was wrong with his weapon, he had released his Kei to resist his opponent's move, but it was already too late.

(At this rate.....already.....)

He couldn't fully release the strength of his Kei at this rate.

"Is this your full power? .....That can't be. This was already in the past, but the strength of a Heaven's Blade successor can't be this hopeless."

This guy wasn't lost in the trap.

".....Are you a Military Artist from Grendan?" he watched his opponent.

The young man took down his mask.

"I'm Haia Salinvan Laia~"

A tattoo covered his entire left face. The same tattoo also covered his left arm.

".....The Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang."

Because of the tattoo, his face looked even more vicious than it was.

"Yes. I'm the leader of the third generation."

A provoking smile showed on the right side of his face.

Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang. It was a mercenary organization made up of Military Artists born in Grendan. They rode their own roaming bus, moving between cities and were hired to fight filth monsters or participate in intercity wars. Sometimes, they would train a city's Military Artists. On the contrary, Heaven's Blade successors only existed in a certain city. Their power wasn't allowed to be leaked to the outside world. Hence, the most famous group of people outside Grendan was the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang.

"I never expected you to be involved in the illegal drug trade."

"That doesn't matter~ I only used them to get in here. I've no intention of helping them."

"Then why.....?" Layfon said as he increased the density of his Kei, readying for the next attack.

"You shouldn't have to ask that question. Only one reason explains my actions besides business purposes – the Haikizoku."

"Haikizoku.....?" Layfon frowned. He hadn't heard of that term before.

Haia also frowned. "What? You don't know? Ah.....Has it been that long since you were a Heaven's Blade successor? Oh? No way ? Could it be a secret?"

What a vexing guy, Layfon thought. Having flowed for so long, the density of Haia's Kei showed no signs of decline.

(Speaking of which.....)

The problem was Layfon's sword. His flow of Kei was pretty rough. Who knew whether the sword could block the next attack?

"Never mind, whatever. Either way, I'm only interested in you and your skills. Your master is my master's, the 2nd generation leader, brother? Then you and I are like brothers in terms of receiving the same skills from the same tribe."

"That is my first time hearing it."

Yes, Layfon's first. But, in that case, he now understood why Haia could execute the move Fleeting shadow and also use a katana. The skill of Layfon's adopted father was different from others. It emphasized more on the way one cut and sliced. Because of that, a katana was chosen as the weapon, and the material was of steel alloy. The blade needed more delicate adjustments compared to weapons used for chopping. The material for the Dite reflected the skill of its maker.

"I'm interested in why you aren't using a katana.....but never mind."

In one swift moment, Haia resumed his attack. Layfon leaped up to avoid it.

"Since you aren't using your full strength, I don't plan to fight you seriously."

Haia's attacks intensified.

(That's not too seriously.....!)

Layfon concentrated on avoiding Haia's attacks as he didn't want to receive them on his sword. He was impressed by Haia's movements. He had fought numerous Military Artists before becoming a Heaven's Blade successor, and none of them had Haia's strength. Who would have thought that such a guy existed outside Grendan? But digging into the core, Haia was also from Grendan. Even so, that did not make him less impressive. Layfon was acknowledged by everyone as a genius, but he didn't think he was the strongest in the world. There were people within Heaven's Blade successors who had more experience than Layfon, who were harder to beat. Layfon didn't think he could win against Queen Alsheyra.

"Hey, hey. What is it? Show me some spirit."

But Layfon still felt that he belonged to a special group. In Grendan, a huge distance existed between Heaven's Blade successors and other Military Artists.

"Could it be that Heaven's Blade successors are only of this level ?" Haia said, gradually speeding up his movements.

Layfon swung down his sword at him.

Both blades filled with Kei, the green sword clashed against the steel katana. The air around them shook.

Metal moaning ran in that air.

The green sword cracked and broke apart. Opposite the debris giving off a green light, Haia smiled happily. But Layfon hadn't finished.

"Haaaaaa!"

External type Kei, roar Kei, a threatening skill. The air shook along the wake of the huge noise, and the scattered debris flew at Haia.

"Woah!" Haia bent backward to evade the debris. Seizing this opening, Layfon gathered his Kei in his limbs. He kicked at Haia's chest and pounded into his opponent's stomach with his fist.

Haia managed to block that with his arm. Layfon's Kei sent him flying away to crash into a building still in its construction stage. Layfon varied his Kei.

External type Kei, Nine Bullets.

Layfon shot out the Kei bullets formed in between his fingers. Kei as tiny as needles chased after Haia to pierce through the building, causing huge explosions.

"Did I get him?"

No.....

He sensed two more presences within the dancing dust. It seemed Haia's companions had arrived.

(Are they coming.....)

Layfon readied his fighting stance, but the presences.....were disappearing fast.

(Should I.....chase after them?)

Still, Layfon was at a disadvantage for having lost his Dite. He decided to give up chasing them as their presence retreated into the far distance.

".....Just what're they planning?"

Haikizoku. The term brought forth a feeling of dislike in Layfon .

Chapter 2: Different nights

"Ah....." Having spaced out for a while on the sofa, Leerin looked out the window.

"It's already night."

She hadn't realized that at all. The sun had sunk down completely. Darkness swallowed the buildings. Light gradually lit up the street lamps and their surrounding buildings. Leerin felt strange, looking down at the city from such a high place.

"So slow," Leerin's adopted father said beside her.

He didn't look like he once had broken numerous bones and was admitted into the hospital. Now, he rested with his usual stiff and expressionless face, eyes closed. Grendan possessed excellent medical skills, but Derek's atypical rate of recovery granted to a Military Artist contributed greatly to his speedy rehabilitation.

"Is the injury really OK?"

"Yes."

Even so, Leerin was still worried. At the time during Gahard's attacks, she thought her adopted father had died. The wounds he had sustained would have brought him death if not for the Heaven's Blade successor Savaris' timely arrival. Although Derek had received the newest medical treatment available, Leerin still felt doubtful about his speedy recovery.

"I'm all healed, thanks to the royal family," her adopted father.....Derek said, opening his eyes.

The fact that Derek could receive the newest and most expensive treatment was all thanks to the royal family. Gahard was possessed by a special filth monster, so Derek's injuries were treated as war-related injuries. However, both Leerin and Derek thought it wasn't just as simple as that. The insurance for war injuries wouldn't be enough to cover the treatment fees. A special organization other than the royal family had paid for the extra.

(And also.....)

Leerin once again confirmed her location.

She was in a high-class room covered by a carpet with exquisite patterns. The sofa she was sitting on, whether it was the seat itself or the back, was made splendidly. It was a costly piece of furniture . Truthfully, the material of the seat was too good, and she felt uncomfortable sitting on it. She had overdone herself choosing the highest-class clothes from all the clothes in her possession, but it still wasn't enough to match the expensive surroundings she was in.

Derek, on the other hand, wasn't worried about that at all. As a Military Artist, wearing the formal Military Artist suit or training clothes was enough. Still, he had chosen the best-looking clothes he had. That was only natural.

She looked out the window again.

Only one place in Grendan was high enough to allow a view of the entire city – the palace in the middle of Grendan, and this was where Leerin and Derek were.

(Formalities aren't needed if this is just for the usual insurance.)

As she thought of that, she felt pain in her stomach. It wasn't time for dinner yet, but tension made her stomach call out.

After leaving the hospital, Derek had sent out a request for an audience with the Queen so he could thank her personally. This was the appointed day for the meeting. Leerin was suspicious of why she was brought along with Derek, but she saw her name on the reply invitation brought in by the other girl.

(Why am I here?)

Leerin had been used as bait at that time. It was all done to eliminate the filth monster, so it couldn't be helped. Leerin couldn't imagine what it was like to be protected desperately by Military Artists while she herself lived her daily life as usual. Both Derek and Layfon were Military Artists. Although Derek had picked up Leerin and took care of her, she still couldn't accept the thought of living safely while people around her fought to protect her.

.....If possible, she wished she'd know before danger arrived.

The incident with Gahard Baren had complicated Leerin's thinking, but she had not yet tidied up her train of thought enough to turn them into words. As she pondered, the door opened and a maid came to lead them to another room.

"Sorry for the wait. Her Majesty's finally finished her work."

"That is perfectly fine," Derek said.

(Finally.....)

The tension in Leerin intensified. Her stomach cramped. She wasn't good in critical moments. Speaking of which, Layfon was the same. He was indifferent in his fights with filth monsters and with powerful Military Artists in Grendan, but in the day before the Heaven's Blade successor ceremony and during the time when he had to apologize to the scary looking Heaven's Blade successor, he wore a troubled expression.

(Do I have.....the same expression now?)

Leerin wanted to confirm in a mirror. If possible, she wanted to wash her face with cold water in a bathroom, but if she did that, her makeup would've been destroyed. Besides, the maid leading them showed no signs of stopping.

(Uu.....)

While Leerin muttered to herself, the maid came to a stop.

"I've brought them," she said to the guards. The Military Artists pulled open the huge double door.

The maid walked in front, followed by Derek and Leerin.

This room was bigger than the one they were in before. In the middle of the room was a large sofa, and deeper into the room was a stage. A figure hid behind the curtains shadowing the stage.

Alsheyra Almonise – The Queen of Grendan.

Leerin and Derek knelt down before the sofa and bowed deeply .

"Thank you for your Majesty's kindness....." Derek began his thank you speech.

Leerin was too tense to lift her head. She knelt there, rooted in the spot. Normally, one wouldn't even have a chance to get so close to this person behind the curtains. Curiosity won against tension. Leerin lifted her head. She couldn't make out the Queen's face clearly because of the curtains, but that figure felt familiar.

"You don't have to worry. This level of compensation is nothing compared to what you've done for Grendan for so many years. It really makes me feel awkward."

The bell-like sound of the Queen numbed Leerin's body.

"I'm sorry for....."

"This is the truth. You were active when you were on duty. The sword you nurtured was also active under my command."

She meant Layfon. Leerin considered the Queen's words as she waited for her reply.

(How does Her Majesty view Layfon.....?)

If Alsheyra forgave Layfon, it would be equivalent to opening Layfon's path back to Grendan..... Leerin concentrated, listening without missing one single word.

"His present situation is due to his immaturity and his ignorance of the world. It has nothing to do with you."

"No, Your Majesty. His immaturity and his ignorance of the city that Your Majesty rules over were all because of me. He's carrying the burden of the consequence of my one-sided education in Military Arts. I should be the one to carry his punishment."

"I see.....Well then, please sit down."

"Yes."

"This isn't the public room where I receive people. It's a much more private room. You can relax. I've chased out the annoying servant."

(Huh.....?)

That last words, the way she joked.....Leerin seemed to have heard them somewhere before. But she couldn't think of whom.

(Is it just my imagination?)

The maid appeared again and laid out two cups of tea.

"Do you know how he is doing?"

"Huh?"

Leerin never thought the Queen would ask her a question.

"Is Layfon doing all right? Or have you two not been exchanging letters?"

"Ah, yes. .....Ah, no, we have!"

Laughter sounded from behind the curtain.

"Sure, it's not that persuasive to speak behind a curtain, but please don't be so tense."

"I, I see....."

"Then, is he well?"

"Yes. Um.....He's in a city called Zuellni....."

"An academy city.....even though he received the Heaven's Blade at that age. I think it must have been hard for him to graduate because of his uselessness, don't you agree? But he passed the entrance test. Were you the one teaching him?"

"Yes."

"You study in a senior school, right? It seems you're excellent."

"No, not at all."

And under Almonise's guidance, Leerin began to speak more normally. She talked about all sorts of things – when she taught Layfon how to do his homework, the days close to his departure from Grendan, and the time when she first received his letter.....

In the conversation, Leerin realized she had been showing something of herself. She was chatting happily to the other after getting rid of her tension. Perhaps she was getting above herself. Talking so closely to this person before her just didn't cut it.

"Layfon.....Can he not return?"

"Leerin."

"Ah.....!"

After aggravating Derek, she realized she had talked too much.

"P, please excuse me....."

"Don't worry. To Layfon, this place is his birthplace. To you, he will always be your most important person. Isn't that right?"

".....Yes."

".....Perhaps he'll return. If the timing's right, then it's not impossible."

"Then....."

"But, whether he'll come back when the time comes.....That I can't decide for him."

Leerin's eyebrows dipped at her firm conclusion.

".....Your martial arts school is from a traveling tribe outside, isn't it?"

Almonise turned the topic to Derek.

"Yes....." Derek spaced out a little, not expecting the topic to suddenly shift to him.

"Most of the Military Artists who followed the first generation Salinvan to travel outside were Psyharden's students. If Psyharden himself wasn't in his old age, he'd probably have gone with them."

"I've heard of that too."

"Your senior has also joined as the trainer of the mercenary gang right?"

"Yes. Ryuhou Gadge, a man much stronger than I. Originally, he should have been the one to inherit the name of Psyharden."

"He's already dead."

Very sudden. So sudden that Derek failed to comprehend its meaning momentarily. When he finally digested that piece of information, his eyes widened.

"......That can't be."

"Ryuhou Salinvan Gadge, the man who was the second generation Head is already dead. It's a real shame, but that is the truth."

The curtain was pulled up a little, and Almonise's arm appeared , holding a metal box.

"This is for you."

Derek stood up and shakily knelt down to receive the box. He opened it on the spot. Inside were wrapped a small metal cylinder and a Dite.

"......This is Ryuhou's Dite. My master gifted him with it..... however, it can't be....."

"It appeared the field medics were unable to completely remove the pollutants in his body after his fight with several filth monsters ."

Inside the cylinder was Ryuhou's hair. When a person who died outside the city could not be buried, his hair was taken back to the city.

"......Ryuhou, did he have any children?" Derek looked at Alsheyra, his face stiff and his shoulders trembling.

"The third generation Head is Ryuhou's apprentice. Just 18 years of age. He's good material."

"I see," he closed his eyes, looking as if he hadn't been shaken by the news just then.

"Can I take care of Ryuhou's funeral?"

"Yes.....The Salinvan mercenary gang has spread the glory of Grendan to the outside world. Their work is considerable. Besides, the martial arts of their leader is precious to Grendan. We definitely can't lose it. Derek Psyharden, don't worry about the dojo and any other trivial matters. All you need is to focus on teaching your students."

"I understand."

"......Leerin Marfes."

"Yes."

"The tribe of Psyharden has a tendency to extend its branches to the outside. This isn't done through blood relations, but through passing down the spirit of the martial arts. That is what is inside Layfon. Even when he had the Heaven's Blade, he refused to use the katana. I hope you can be suitably prepared about that."

Leerin didn't respond.

The meeting finished like that. Derek left the room with the box containing Ryuhou's hair. Leerin followed behind him.

In the split second when the door was in the midst of closing behind her, she said lightly but firmly, "No."

To Leerin, the present was exhausting.

She was like a spoiled kid. A kid who cried and shouted because she didn't like the present situation.....if she was a little child, she'd be allowed to do so. But Leerin wasn't of that age anymore. Fifteen, and she would be sixteen this year. She'd have reached the age that allowed her to work.

She was about to reach the age in which she had to personally do something to change the situations that she didn't like.

But what could she do?

She thought of this as she walked alone in Grendan under the dark sky. She had parted with Derek and was on the way back to the dormitory. Leaving the boisterous street, she turned into a quieter street of the residential area. Under the light of the street lamp, irresistible loneliness enveloped Leerin.

No, this wasn't loneliness.

She reached an intersection. On her left, the path led to the school, and her right led back to the dormitory. Where would she end up if she kept going straight? The days of walking to the left or to the right were normal to the sixteen year old Leerin.

To keep walking straight.....if she kept walking.....

Was there one? Was there a road that would bring her to Layfon ? Impossible. Rationalism told her so. Before her was only the

mansion of some unknown person. Lying ahead of her was also a medium sized street with not too busy shops that managed to stay afloat. There were clothes and accessory shops and also cafes and bakeries. If she kept on walking, it'd only be normal – the normal days of Leerin Marfes "without Layfon".

This wasn't loneliness.

She was lost.

"Ah."

Someone had patted her shoulder. She turned around and saw Synola.

"Senpai?"

"What is it? Spacing out here?"

"Ah, no....." she lifted her head, failing to prevent the words from tumbling out. "Nothing."

"....."

She planned to return to the dormitory. In order to not cause Synola any worries, she pretended nothing was wrong and planned to leave like that, but her feet refused to move.

"N~....."

"Wa"

Suddenly, Synola put her hand on Leerin's head and caressed her hair.

"Wh, what're you doing?"

"I'm hungry, let's go eat something."

"Huh?"

"Why?" before she could say more, Leerin's hand was taken up and she was pulled in another direction.

The place she was taken to had little to do with filling one's stomach, a bar.....

"Senpai.....I'm not of age yet."

"That's fine. They've got juice, and the food's not bad."

From somewhere unknown shone dim green light that failed to illuminate the faces of customers in the bar. Only through the normal light of the bar where the drinks were kept could Leerin see clearly the figure of the bar owner.

"But....."

"It's alright, it's alright. Hey, owner. Get me something to eat."

".....This is a bar."

"Right, right."

"We don't have that kind of thing. Geez....." the owner sighed, holding a wine glass.

"This guy used to study in the same research institution as me."

"Huh?"

"He really likes wine, so he left."

"I'm sorry."

"What's so bad about that? It's most important to live a life you like."

During their conversation, the owner had finished cooking chicken fried rice.

"Uh~ That's too usual. You could have wrapped it in egg."

"Shut up, you spoiled lady. Drink up. Drink up," he placed two glasses in front them.

"Ah, I....."

"I know. This is just a cocktail."

Sitting before Leerin was a glass of green liquid.

(For some reason, I don't think this is healthy.)

If she said that, the owner would get angry. But.....the green drink suited the atmosphere of the bar. Under the bright light, the ice inside the glass shone like gems.

Gu~~~~~~

"Uu."

Her stomach was calling.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Please don't laugh."

"Never mind. Let's eat."

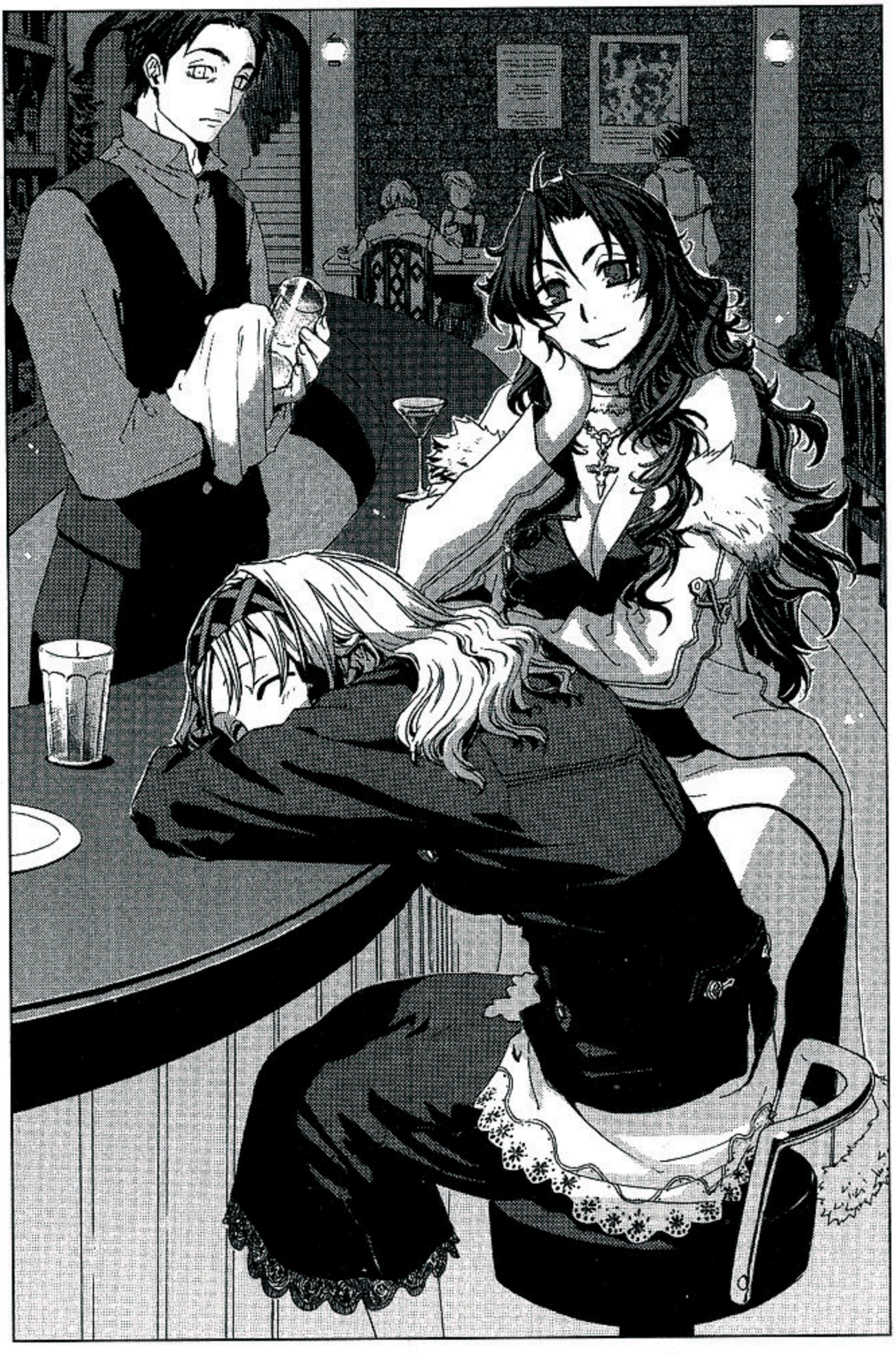
Under Synola's laughter and the owner's persuasion, Leerin took a spoon, her face red, and she started eating the chicken fried rice along with the cocktail.

This was a world of green diamonds.

Unable to see the customers' faces clearly, Leerin felt as if she was underwater. She viewed everything with silence. That was the world it was like. Underneath the clear light, the owner gazed around, or it could be that the customers were looking at the owner. What an unbelievable world. This was the feeling she got, as if she were walking in a tunnel underneath an artificial lake.

(Ah, how unrealistic.)

As if her words leaped into the water, a sound of water floated to her ears.



(I feel so at peace.)

The anxiety within her melted in the water. Having finished the rice, she drained the remainder of the cocktail. The ice in the glass had already melted. The owner offered her another glass, but she refused. If she kept on drinking, she would not be able to stay in this watery world. For some reason, that was how she felt about it.

"Well well, she's asleep."

After drinking three glasses of cocktail, Synola noticed Leerin had fallen asleep.

"Speaking of which, don't bring in someone who isn't an adult yet," the owner said.

"I wonder who wanted to forget his troubles by getting drunk," Synola ordered her fourth wine.

"Anyone with worries can come here. Isn't it human to want to forget reality at this moment?"

"But nothing is resolved by drinking."

"I need a spare."

"Huh, I guessed so already. Besides, it must be you bullying the other? You're like that, pretending to be a kid when you find someone you like."

"What's so bad with it? It's enjoyable to observe a girl in love."

"What a strange hobby."

Synola smiled bitterly at that conclusion.

After parting from Layfon and the others at the restaurant, Sharnid headed alone to a noisier part of the area. He didn't plan anything special. He was just going to show himself in familiar shops and chat with people to spend his night.

The long night was a source of Sharnid's worries. He had thought numerous times of how great it'd be if he could just jump into bed and sleep when he felt the night was too long. There wasn't a need to take insomnia tablets and set up a date with a girl. He just needed to spend his time somehow.

No, he wasn't deliberately trying to use up time. He just wanted to stay here. At least that was how he thought of it.

Sharnid left the shop and saw someone making a musical performance on the street. He backed away from the crowd surrounding the performer, and hid himself in the shadow of the door of a closed shop. Closing his eyes, he listened without putting too much heart in it.

He didn't want to stand out too much right now. He was well known for showing his face in the inter-platoon matches. At school , he always had girls chasing after him. At that time, he might have wanted them to catch him too, but nobody came to chat with him now – because he didn't want them to find him. He had naturally hidden his presence.

On the street were the musical performer and the crowd, people who sold their handmade crafts, lovers who picked their favorite pieces. The half-decent tune accompanied the stiff singing amplified by the microphone. The singing was even softer than the music. No matter which side it was, people were everywhere around Sharnid. Standing in the midst of all that, Sharnid had closed his eyes as he felt the passing of time. He listened carefully and waited quietly for the moment to come.

Today, that moment came particularly earlier than usual.

At that sound pouring through his ears, Sharnid opened his eyes. Light leaped into darkness. The light around the shops stabbed his eyes. Among the stream of people, the figure that Sharnid was watching had disappeared from the shop without his noticing.

Sharnid waited, and a golden light flashed past him.

Long and curly hair, as if ready to attack at any minute, shook according to her gait. Her chin was like a polished dagger. Lips clamped, she only gazed ahead of her. Always ahead.

She walked past Sharnid. Their gazes didn't overlap. Would she have stopped if he had called out? Perhaps. Shena had kept on walking ahead. Just what was she doing? Sure, there had to be an answer to this, but he was anxious to find out the answer.

Feeling like laughing at his indecisiveness, Sharnid left the shadow of the door to follow her.

She exited the busy street without hesitation. Her pace didn't slow. It seemed she had already made up her mind to leave this place.

(Hm?)

Looking at her fearless back, a question floated up in Sharnid's mind, unbidden.

(Could she be.....)

Tension surfaced in him. Cautiously he kept his Kei inside him and followed her at a distance.

They arrived at the outer area of Zuellni near the practicum area of the Construction course. He remembered there were some shops around here when he first enrolled in the Academy City. Few people would come to this place, but it was well-known because of its suitability as a hide-and-seek location. However, when Sharnid had taken notice of this place, the shops were already closing down. In the end, its one-year level of popularity was sustained by what was in vogue in the Academy City.

An explosion pulled him out of his memory.

She stopped in her tracks and got ready to fight. The sound of the explosion was from a far distance. Sharnid hid himself in the shadow of a building, keeping his Kei at the ready. A horrifying presence flashed above his head.

(Layfon, is it?)

That presence felt familiar. In one split second, Sharnid saw Layfon pursuing someone unfamiliar to him. The two figures left his view of vision quickly. It seemed Shena wasn't worried about Layfon and the guy he was chasing. She kept moving towards the direction of the sound. Sharnid used internal type Kei to strengthen his muscles and he leaped onto a rooftop after her.

As he expected, her destination was around the shops. The water guns put on display were blown away as Military Artists of the City Police rushed in.

Sharnid strengthened his vision and confirmed the situation through the dim moonlight.

The City Police surrounded one Military Artist, who got past the police enclosure with ease. Sharnid saw Layfon chase after that guy, but he didn't move over to help. He watched the Military Artist that had gotten away. A female. About the same age as Layfon.

(.....Wrong person.)

That wasn't something that she must not see. Relieved, tension left his stomach.

When he had recovered himself, he felt a presence at his back.

"Why are you here?"

It was her. Something hard touched his back. To think the person he had been chasing had doubled back to come behind him . So unsightly of him.....He couldn't help but mock himself.

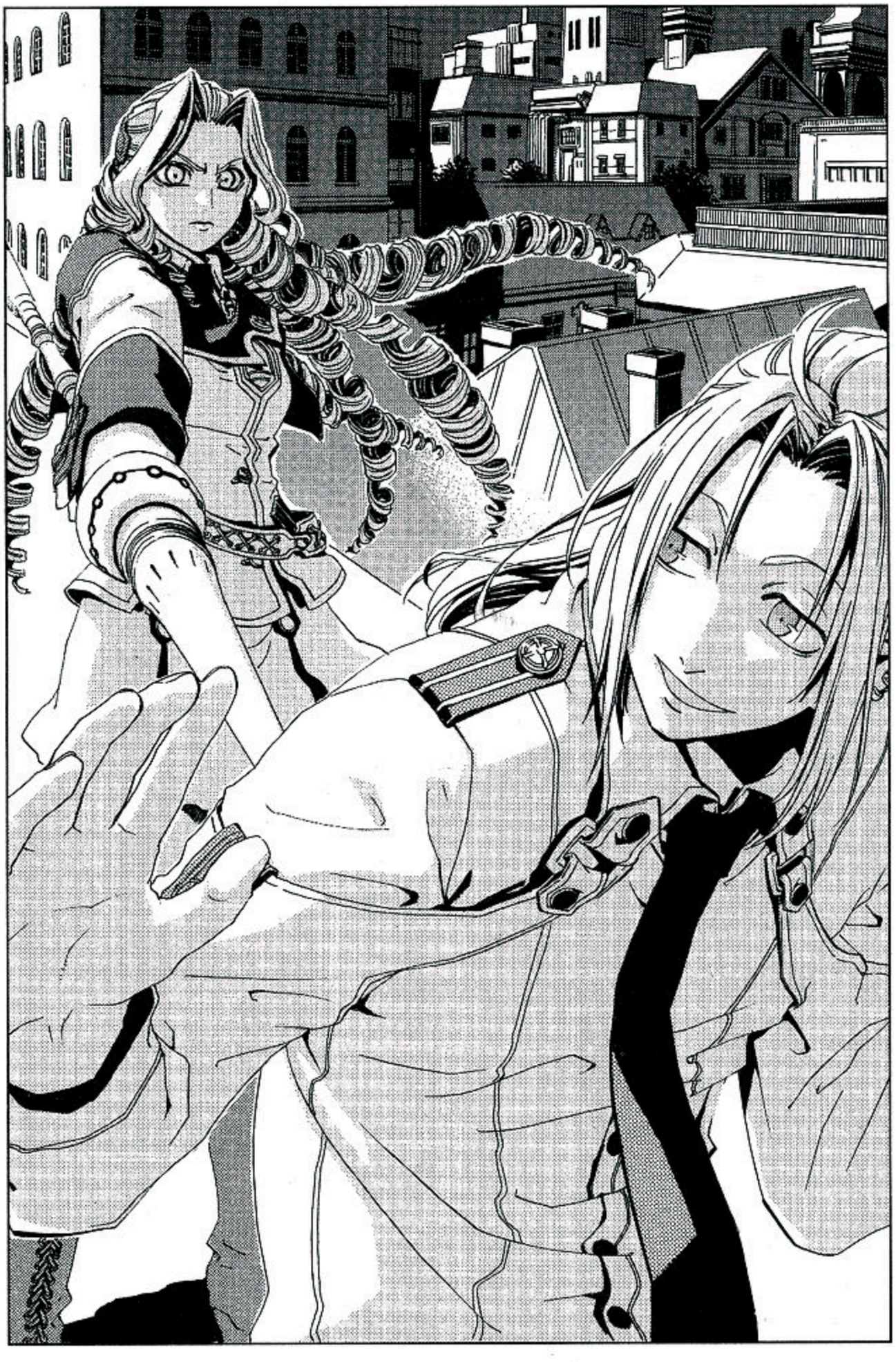
"Taking nighttime strolls is my hobby. Like you, I saw something interesting today. Don't you think it's quite an exciting night tonight?"

"I don't think so. It's just a noisy and uncomfortable night."

Incredible killing intent poured out behind him. He raised his arms above his shoulders.

"Don't move. Even with the safety lock on, you won't last at this distance."

Sharnid turned around regardless. He wasn't pierced through. She held a lance made of white alloy, her eyes holding Sharnid's in dissatisfaction.



"Why are you here?" she asked again.

"Didn't I say taking nighttime strolls is my hobby, Shena?"

"Don't call me by my name."

Shena.....Dalshena looked discontent. Dalshena Che Matelna, the Vice Captain of the 10th platoon, who used to be Sharnid's comrade.

".....Have you noticed, Sharnid?"

"Noticed what?"

Only the two of them were on the rooftop of the pub. He made light of the question that no one else but only the two of them would understand.

"....."

"What're you saying? I was just strolling alone and ended up here. That's all. Isn't it the same with you?" he said.

".....Yeah."

"Right. Well, we ran into each other because of the ruckus."

With doubt in her expression, she put away the lance.

"Then.....Seems like the chaos over there's finished. Time for me to go," Sharnid said, having glanced at the shop.

"Sharnid."

He stopped in his steps.

"Why did you leave us?"

Why? Just why? He had also asked himself that question numerous times. He had made Dinn and Shena very angry, bringing them huge trouble.

"Don't you know?" he said.

"I'm asking because I don't know!"

"Really.....?"

".....Um."

Looking at her trying to suppress her anger, he couldn't help but laugh.

"Why.....Didn't we swear? We decided to guard Zuellni together. Have you forgotten?" she reproved him.

"I didn't."

"Then....."

"I'm keeping the oath in my own way."

"Is the 17th platoon the answer?"

"Probably."

"Do you think you can better keep that oath by staying with the 17th platoon than with us?"

"I'm not sure about that, but....."

"But.....What?"

"Shena, sometimes when you want everything, you lose everything. If you keep speaking like that, you'll end up like me."

"What are you saying?"

Sharnid didn't reply. He headed in the direction back to his dormitory. Shena didn't chase after him. Was she thinking of the meaning behind Sharnid's words, or had she already tossed it away and continued on her path.....

Just keep moving forward. That phrase was the most suitable for Dalshena. Throw away all burdens and keep moving forward towards the roads ahead. Dalshena Che Matelna was the most suited to this phrase.

"Ah.....Geez."

He was so laughable to hope for her to look back at him.

He didn't have the confidence to sleep well tonight.

The rumble of an explosion woke Nina from her sleep.

"What's happening?"

While strengthening her ears to listen to any sounds, she dressed herself in the sports uniform with lightning speed. She grabbed the weapon harness sitting by her bedside and left her room. Outside the dormitory, waves of Kei assaulted her.

"It should be from that direction....." she started running.

The Kei from a certain direction felt similar.

(Layfon? Is he fighting?)

As she ran, she pulled out the Dites and restored them. She had no idea what was happening right now. Why was there a fight around here? All she understood was that Layfon was fighting. This was enough of a reason to propel Nina forward.

However, this level of Kei.....Thanks to Layfon's training, Nina managed to feel it. The Kei she felt just then was more intense than the Kei that Layfon used in the inter-platoon matches. His opponent's Kei was the same. A type of Kei that was stronger than any platoon members.

No, even stronger than that.

The fact that Layfon was fighting alone with that type of an opponent worried her.

"Why can't that guy....." the rest of the words never got out of her mouth.

"!"

The sudden presence stopped Nina in her tracks. She leaped to her left. The path she was on just a moment ago exploded. External type Kei.

Nina climbed to her feet. She checked her surroundings but didn't find her attacker.

"Who is it!?" she shouted.

The sound of something slicing through air answered her. Nina avoided that attack too. As the ground exploded again, Nina saw the gathered Kei.

(An arrow?)

An arrow that was shot with Kei? It seemed the weapon was a bow, which meant the enemy wasn't anywhere close.

"This is bad."

She had deduced the enemy's location from the direction the shot came from, but she had yet to see the enemy himself. Speaking of which, Nina's Kei was not enough to counterattack at

this distance. If she ran in to get closer, her enemy would probably retreat to maintain a desired distance, but if Nina was willing to spend some time on this, she could probably find a way to.....

But if she did that, then Layfon would have to fight alone. She must hurry and get to Layfon's side.

(In that case.....)

She had decided. A light nod of the head, and she ran for Layfon's direction.

The arrow came.

"Ha!"

Her iron whip blocked the arrow. An instantaneous explosion sent Nina flying. She rolled back to her feet and immediately ran through the dust cloud.

Internal type variation of Kei – Kongoukei.

Layfon had taught her this defensive Kei technique. She hadn't completely mastered it yet, but it was enough to cancel the impact of the Kei in the arrow.

"I don't have time to play with you!" she roared at her enemy and kept on running

Another arrow shot at her. She flicked it down. Another explosion, another cancellation and she continued moving forward , repeating the same process.

After the third arrow, the precision of the enemy archer started to decline. One of the arrows hit the ground behind Nina before exploding. The archer needed some time to prepare before shooting more accurately. The arrow that had failed to hit Nina only managed to break the ground's hard surface into tiny pieces.

The Kei of the arrows that were crashing against Nina's back suddenly disappeared.

"What!"

She had a bad feeling about this.

The archer had stopped shooting. Nina kept on running while increasing her speed. When she reached her destination, everywhere was quiet.

The ground of the destination was torn apart, evidence of an intense fight. Sparks scattered across the ground. Layfon's back faced her. He didn't look injured, but he was just standing there. Looking at the inert Layfon, Nina's bad feeling didn't go away. She saw a Dite lying among the debris on the ground. Layfon's Dite in its restored form. Only the handle was left. It didn't seem to have held the steel threads form. Besides, a huge crack ran down the handle.

"Layfon....."

"".....Huh? Senpai?" Layfon turned around, looking shocked. Nina was surprised that he didn't notice her when she was standing so close to him.

"Why are you here?"

"That should be my line. Just what happened?" she asked, trying to make it sound casual.

"Ah, uh.....well.....how should I put it? Um....." he stammered with a troubled expression.

(Ah.....As I thought.)

He tried to explain but ended up saying nothing. As she watched him, she also felt something strange about him. Layfon had a strange habit of standing in the disadvantaged side. He was like that when attacked by the larvae. He was like that when he fought the matured filth monster alone. He was probably like that too when he was in the ruined city's Mechanical Department a few days ago. He was always getting injured, choosing to get injured, by himself when he fought.

That was hard for her to imagine.

But.....

(Have you noticed it?)

Whether Layfon noticed it or not.....Nina could not make a conclusion.

Chapter 3: Envisioning and Reality

Early morning the next day, Layfon went to the alchemy building for the new Dite that Harley had made for him.

"That kind of damage is so.....exaggerated," Harley said with wide eyes at Layfon's Dite. He was spreading jam on a piece of bread.

"Beautifully broken into pieces."

Layfon's sword was in its restored form. The level of damage made it unable to turn back into a hand held Dite. On Harley's table was the handle of Layfon's Dite. The broken parts were like brittle stones, so fragile that a touch of a finger was enough to send the remaining pieces scattering down.

"It's not possible to repair this. It'll be faster if I just make a new one."

"Ok. Thanks."

"Got it. I should have it done quickly with the data left from last time. I'll take care of the admin procedures too."

"Sorry about that."

"No problem. I'm responsible for maintenance in the 17th platoon. Besides, I have some admin registration things to do for

the Dites too.....Geez, that Kirik's totally useless in this area, so I have to do everything," Harley shrugged and suddenly clapped his hands together.

"Can we do the adjustments for that now?"

"Can we? Kirik-san's not here."

"No problem, no problem. I'm doing the final adjustments anyway. Besides, we don't know when he'll show up," he said as he went into the research room and took out a Dite from one of the drawers.

Layfon took the Dite and felt its heavy weight in his hand. It seemed to be extremely dense, perhaps three times denser than a normal Dite.

"While removing the cartridge slots, we were able to make it much more dense that it previously was. However, the loss of separation means the Dite has now lost several of its combinations. Also, that has created a weakness. You can use different types of Kei, so it might be a bit troublesome. As for the shape, the Dite's recorded different appearances. Theoretically, you should be able change the Dite according to different uses."

"But it might not work as well in reality."

"Yeah? Um....."

Layfon spoke the key word and restored the Dite. Only one setting was made.

"We originally wanted to make two settings. The advantage of an Adamantium Dite with its combined alloys is its variety in shapes and quality, but we didn't have time to make that setting when manufacturing the simple version. When the final product came out, it wasn't possible to turn it back."

"It's all right, since I still have the Sapphire Dite."

He didn't have to use the steel threads in platoon matches, so it didn't matter that the Adamantium Dite didn't have that setting. Also, Harley and his colleagues were researching on another model to be used against filth monsters. Layfon had no need to ask them to add the steel threads setting in at all.

"Give it a try."

Under Harley's urging, Layfon allowed his Kei to pour into the Adamantium Dite. The Dite turned slightly hot in his hand and its shape changed in a split second.

"......Huh?"

The new shape made Layfon widen his eyes.

"It's......a katana."

"Yes," Harley said, cocking his head. "Kirik made it that way."

"......Could you change it?"

"Impossible," came an impatient voice from behind Layfon. Layfon had already sensed the newcomer before the voice reached him and before Harley noticed. He turned around.

"It's because this shape suits you more," the handsome man sitting in the wheelchair said, glaring at Layfon in irritation.

"Kirik, how rare to see you here so early," Harley said.

"I came to see him so that this thing could be used to its fullest potential," he pushed his wheelchair through the mess in the room.

"According to classification, both a sword and a katana are the same, but a huge difference exists between their usage. A sword is used to slash then cut, and a katana is used to cut then let its enemy fall apart. Both are used to cut, but the movement of the wielder differs. Your movement is first to cut, which causes the object to fall apart. The model before was made like that of a katana, but the blade was still a sword's. This time it's different. We made it so it could cut perfectly," he said while watching the Adamantium Dite. "I've included my family's secret data on many famous katana in this Dite. Usually, you won't see a second Dite with power as high as the first, but this is close enough. It's the best tool to help you become the strongest. Are you still unsatisfied with this?"

"I didn't mean that....."

"Then why?"

Layfon couldn't answer him.

"You stand at a level that all Military Artists want to reach, but you're not willing to use your full strength. Even I get irritated at that."

Noise came from Kirik's wheelchair. Layfon looked at him and realized the noise originated from Kirik's tightening grip on the handles of the wheelchair. He noticed something else. Although there wasn't much, Kei existed in Kirik's body. The flow was clumsy and slow in a muddy color. His flow of Kei was unusual, but it didn't look fatal. It might have something to do with his legs. Because of his legs, the Kei flow became less smooth, or perhaps it was the other way around, that the unusual flow of Kei had disabled his legs.....Layfon didn't want to ask about it. Kirik himself probably wouldn't answer anyway, but.....he could tell that Kirik regretted it a lot.

"You probably don't have to use your full strength in this place, but why are you like that too when you fight filth monsters? Are you saying they aren't opponents worth your time?"

Layfon was in a life and death situation when he fought the matured filth monster. He didn't plan to not use everything he had . But.....

".....Why do you refuse to use a katana?"

"Refuse....."

"Yes, you ARE refusing." Kirik said, as if he would jump up at Layfon's weak protest. "You choose to fight with a sword, but your true self has the impression of a katana. Doesn't that mean you're refusing the katana? What else can explain it?"

"Although I'm interested in why you aren't using a katana....."

Haia, the leader of Salinvan Mercenary Gang, raised under Layfon's adopted father's brother in the same martial arts school as Layfon, had said that last night. His fighting power matched that of a mercenary leader who had had lots of experience accumulated from countless battles.

A katana. He used a katana that was the same as the one Derek Psyharden used. His movements were the same, using Fleeting Shadow to attack with high speed, a move that Derek took pride in . Although Layfon wasn't willing, his memories of Grendan surfaced one by one. His true self fought with a katana. His weapon was originally a katana. He trained with a wooden katana.

It was the beginning of Layfon as a Military Artist.

"What is it?"

Looking around in confusion to confirm his location, he ran across Nina. It was the road to the Military Arts training complex. He was heading over there after leaving Harley's research lab.

"Ah, ah.....no, nothing," surprised at the close distance between them. He took a step back, but Nina didn't.

"Are you not feeling well because of yesterday? Or do you have a fever?" she pulled him over with a worried expression and felt his forehead with her hand.

"It's ok. It's really ok," Layfon said, feeling the coolness from Nina's hand and took another step back.

"Um, doesn't feel like you have a fever. Then what were you thinking?"

"No, nothing much....."

"Really. Don't you find it strange that I was this close to you but you didn't notice?"

"Huh.....Not really."

It seemed like today was the day when his opinions wouldn't be accepted. No, if he were to think closely, were his words even believable?

(.....Nope.)

It was a bit sad. Well, Nina had been able to discern the truth from the lies ever since she was little.

"Then what're you worrying about today?"

They ended up having lunch together in the training room of the 17th platoon. They had bought bento at a convenience store and had some drinks from the locker room of the training complex .

"No, nothing."

"Don't say that."

"No, really....."

"I don't believe you."

"As I said....."

"Spill it honestly."

She totally ignored his protests. Looking troubled, Layfon dug into his lunch. As long as his mouth was full, it was all right to not answer even if he heard her question. On the other hand, Nina had a good education, so she hated chatting while eating. Yesterday she had a terrible expression when Sharnid and Harley were talking and eating at the same time.

".....Leave lunch for a while. I will make you speak the truth," she said in a low voice as he continued to eat.

(Please God, send someone now. Anyone.) He could only pray. But that "anyone" could only be Felli, Sharnid or Harley. Felli and Sharnid were always late. He couldn't imagine them heading over straight after lunch. Harley was the last one left, but he'd probably be late too as he was making Layfon a new Dite.

(.....No other way.)

If that was the way it was, he had no choice but to spill the beans. This time, Nina was very forceful. He understood her that much from his accumulated experience. In order to reach her goal, she would do everything she could for it.

"Why do you want to know so much?" He asked after swallowing.

"What? Isn't it natural....."

For some reason, she said so after shifting her position so there was some distance between them. "Because you're my subordinate. "

A predictable answer. In the face of such an answer, Layfon couldn't find any reasons to resist her.

(.....Eh?)

But she looked strange today. Having said what she wanted, Nina turned her face to the side as if she had sealed her mouth.

".....Did you steal that bento?"

"Of course not, stupid."

She was mad.

They continued to eat like that with their backs facing each other. She'd probably ask him again when they finished eating. Thinking of that, he planned to chew slowly, but the food wasn't

enough for a young man in his growing stage. He ended up finishing the bento quickly.

Nina was almost finished with her lunch.

(Oh no.....)

He dragged out the time to finish his juice as much as possible, praying for someone to open the door to the training room.

When Nina was about to speak, the door opened.

"You're already here? Good."

"Formed? And....."

Behind Formed Garen was Naruki, who walked in with an annoyed expression.

"You two look to be in a good mood. May I?"

"Uh, no problem," Nina nodded.

"Got anything?"

"I don't want to waste time either. I'll cut to the chase," Formed said and looked at Naruki. Naruki still wore the expression of someone who wasn't satisfied with something.

"Ah~ Before that, I want to say I'll accept the captain's request."

"Really?"

That request must be Nina's previous request to the City Police to allow Naruki to enter the 17th platoon.

"Huh? Really?" Nina said.

Nina's reaction was slower. Surprised, Layfon looked at Formed and Naruki for confirmation. Nina didn't look convinced either. On top of that, Naruki's expression showed that it wasn't her idea in the first place.

"But there's a condition."

"As expected."

"I'm not accepting all your conditions. I'm sorry, but she won't officially enter the platoon. Besides, she herself doesn't want to."

".....Although it's true that we need her, if she doesn't want to, she'll only lower the team's fighting strength," Nina said frankly. Speaking about wanting to, Nina was number one in the entire team.

"Yeah, I understand. But if you listen to my request, I'm sure she'll feel better about it. Besides, you can dismiss her if she doesn't have what it takes, and we can pretend we haven't had this conversation. What do you think?"

"Leader!"

"Isn't that natural? Listen, infiltration is part of a police officer's work. If it isn't done properly, it'll be life-threatening. Perhaps this

kind of dangerous work won't be needed in an Academy City, but if you plan to work in the police force after leaving this city, this is a very good training opportunity. If you're to infiltrate an organization, then you must first know your purpose. Be more spirited. If you can't do this, then you fail."

Naruki lowered her head. She was like a big sister in front of Meishen and Mifi, but now she was being rebuked like a little kid. Layfon found that unexpected.

"......Well, back to the topic," Formed said to Nina.

"What is it?"

"Ah, first, it's about yesterday. Layfon, thanks for your help."

"But he escaped....." Layfon lowered his head.

"That can't be helped. Besides, we already reached our original purpose. We caught the fake students and suppressed the circulation of their goods." Formed went on to explain yesterday's operation to Nina.

"Illegal drugs.....Does that mean what you came here for has something to do with that?" Nina said, suddenly very serious.

Formed nodded. "Yes."

"This is ridiculous. How would a platoon member have anything to do....."

"Can't imagine? Even if it's to do with the current situation Zuellni is in?"

"Urgh....."

"If we lose the mine we're using right now, Zuellni's finished. This year's Military Arts Competition is decisive. Many students in the platoons love this school deeply. If they feel the heavy burden of Zuellni's fate, then it wouldn't be strange for them to be associated with this, right?"

Layfon understood Formed's words. Illegal drugs.....The drugs that increased the flow of Kei were perfect for this kind of use.

".....This is just speculation."

Nina didn't agree with him.

"Yes, it's just my speculation. Perhaps Military Arts students with bad marks want it. Perhaps some fools exist who think the side-effects of the drug won't appear for them. Regardless, this is all speculation, but I'm willing to bet on it since the possibility of it happening is so high."

".....Do you have any clues of platoon members participating in illegal drug dealing?"

".....We've obtained a firm clue while checking the paths of imports. Goods that come in by roaming buses cannot possibly escape our investigation, but that's only limited to legal trade goods. Checks are more lax on private things in small numbers.

Fake student IDs can get past a human eye, but not a computer. The illegal drug dealing can only be made through a real student's address. Mail is sent to real students, then the fake IDs are taken to where the fake students gather. We've been checking all personal mails and mailing records for a year, and we've been double checking everything. The six people who are on the records the most....." he sighed and paused. "I've already said too much. I can't do anything else if you decide not to accept us. Naruki entering the 17th platoon is to help with the investigation. I hope you can keep quiet about it and cooperate with us."

"I accept."

"Are you sure? Do you need to consider it....."

"No need. Since you have clues, we'll help out."

"What would you do if they take illegal drugs because they want to protect this city?" Formed tossed out the doubt to Nina's answer. "If they do it out of protecting the city, what would you do ? It's illegal, but it's a choice made to resolve the crisis. What if they do it because there is no other way? Zuellni is at its end. They plan to sacrifice themselves to save the city. What would you do?"

Why was Formed pushing Nina? He'd have probably asked Layfon the same questions. Layfon didn't understand why.

He spaced out a bit, and came to some understanding. Formed was eliminating later problems by raising them now. Layfon didn't know what he himself would do. He looked at Nina. How would she answer?

"......To sacrifice oneself in order to save something. It sounds good but it's just being selfish. It's just facing difficulties and choosing the easy way out. I'm determined to protect everything in this city. I don't want to sacrifice anyone. I'll protect everything, including myself."

No matter when it was, she could always say something this strong to pierce Layfon.

"......I've never heard such willful words," Formed shook his head, at ease.

"But I've never heard something that reassuring. Well, I'm leaving it all to you."

"Roger."

Nina and Formed shook hands.

"OK, they are....."

"......Six people. I said so. Five of them are....."

He wrote the names with his finger. Nina's face stiffened.

"No....."

"Their mail all came from the same city, but they themselves aren't from that city. It's the home city of the sixth person. About this sixth person's name..."

Layfon vaguely remembered the name. Probably a platoon member. That was it.

Nina should have understood the truth when she heard the name. Then why.....

He thought for a moment and finally recalled which platoon this person belonged to. Layfon's expression now matched Nina's. The tenth platoon.

"Dinn Dee."

The face of a bald young man surfaced in Layfon's mind.

The sound breathing during sleep hovered in his ears. In a way, it was the same as an interrogation.

"Geez....." Sighing and tired, Gorneo was on the way back to his dormitory. The time was after platoon training and dinner.

Naturally, Shante sat on his shoulders. She was fast asleep, her chin leaning on his head. Gorneo worried about whether she

might fall off. Having spent a lot of her strength in training, she just ate afterward and slept. Although he had been with her since he started first year here, she was still like a beast and a kid.

"Really....." he sighed again and entered the dormitory. He walked past his room.

Shante's room was next to his. He pressed the doorbell and passed Shante to her roommate, who was from Shante's home city. Gorneo returned to his room.

He felt the unusual atmosphere the moment he opened the door .

He opened the door slowly but didn't switch on the light. He brought out the card-shaped Dite from his coat pocket, and inserted it into his wristband so he could restore it at any time.

"Who is it?" He asked, increasing his internal Kei in readiness for a fight.

".....Well, you pass. I was hoping you'd have noticed before you opened the door," a voice came from inside the room.

"I said, who are you?"

The light was switched on. Carefully, Gorneo walked deeper into the room and saw a young man sitting on the sofa. The small table before the man was littered with fast food wrappers. He was drinking juice and reading a magazine. A strange tattoo decorated the left side of his face.

"This is my room," Gorneo said.

The young man's attitude wasn't hostile, but it wasn't enough of a reason for Gorneo to relax. He watched the young man stand up. ..... Haia.

"And the female hiding in the kitchen. Come out," he said.

"......Ah."

"Come out," Haia said, and a young woman walked out of the kitchen's shadow. Golden hair framing a slender body, she was about the same age as Haia. A pair of big glasses sat on the small bridge of her nose. She held a huge bow. It shrank back into a small Dite after she canceled the restoration.

"Myunfa, your Kei isn't up to standards," Haia said to the young woman.

"......Sorry."

"If you can't hide your presence, you'll have trouble as an archer , so I've been giving you more practice like trailing a target and such."

"Uh, uh, uh, I can't do that kind of thing," she shook her head.

"We just need to find a guy you like. You could follow him and observe him for a whole day, as well as train yourself. Isn't that like shooting two birds with one stone?"

"That.....That kind of thing....." She shook her head fiercely with her face all red.

Haia laughed.

".....Just who are you people? Are you here just for this show?"

"Yeah~ Would we be happier if we came just for this show? But we'll have to get serious now. My name is Haia Salinvan Laia."

Anyone from Grendan would have noticed Haia's second name. Gorneo's alertness increased.

"From the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang?"

"I'm the third Head. This is Myunfa, my first Military Arts student."

"P, pleased to meet you."

"Um....." Gorneo returned the nicety and swung his gaze back to Haia.

".....What's the Guidance Mercenary Gang doing in an Academy City? Has the Student President hired you?"

"That side too~ Speaking of which, isn't that better? Yeah, I'm regretting a little. Never mind, I'll leave that for later."

Haia's more relaxed tone was confusing for Gorneo.

"I didn't come here for business. I hope you can cooperate with me. Since Wolfstein Alseif doesn't know anything about it, I've come to seek your help."

"Cooperation? Or is there something else.....?"

"What I want is your help in intelligence. The people living in the city know it best. Of course. Well then, about the information.....I'll let you in if you have something useful. How does that sound? Since you're the second son of the Luckens family, I thought it wouldn't be strange if you knew of it. Actually, it is part of the Mercenary Gang's secret history."

".....Could it be....."

"Oh, you do know."

"Could it be real.....? Haikizoku," Gorneo watched Haia in disbelief. The time Gorneo heard of this term was when his older brother became a Heaven's Blade successor. He heard of it in a conversation between his grandfather and his older brother.

"It's a crazy power nurtured from a destroyed city....."

That was what his grandfather said. The Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang left the city in order to search for this power.

"I thought it was just a legend....."

"If it really was a legend, then the first generation Head didn't have to work so hard."

"So it does exist?"

"What a deep doubt. But it isn't in Zuellni, it's in the ruined city next to here. We've searched that city already, but didn't find anything, so we came over here."

"In that city....." Gorneo fell into his memories. "....Now that you mention it, I think the Psychokinesist of the 17th platoon said she found something."

"Oh?"

At that time, the Psychokinesist of the 5th platoon didn't find anything, but Layfon's 17th platoon might have. But if that really was the Haikizoku.....

"The twisted Electronic Fairy of a dead city.....I never thought it was real."

"Can't help it if it is real, but even I only half believe it. I want to find one and have a look, but I can't find it."

"Well.....Leader," Myunfa raised her hand.

"What is it?"

"Um.....It's the 17th platoon, isn't it? Its Psychokinesist, right? How about we ask for her help? Fermaus only knows the general direction, but he can't come here....."

"That's a good suggestion. Well then, Gorneo, who is that Psychokinesist?"

"Felli Loss, the younger sister of the Student President."

"The Student President.....meaning the leader of this city, right?
"

"Yes."

"Then it's simple, isn't it?" Haia laughed, and after that, he obtained various kinds of information on Zuellni from Gorneo.

On that day, they continued training in the fundamentals as usual after introducing Naruki to the other three team members. Other than that, Nina announced the cancellation of the training camp that they had planned for tomorrow and the day after. Naruki tripped and fell numerous times in the balance training with the balls scattered on the floor. Under Layfon's advice, she finally managed to walk faster than a normal pace around the room after two hours of training. Afterward, they had combat training on the balls between members divided into two teams. Naruki somehow managed to control her movements after falling countless times. When Nina ended training, Naruki was covered in sweat, unable to move on the floor.

"Are you all right?"

Everyone had gone to the shower room. Only Layfon came to deliver an energy juice to her.

".....Do you do this everyday?"

"Today's training is more relaxing already."

They didn't even do the ball-hitting training. In fact, today's training wasn't intense, but it wasn't useless. Training in the fundamentals was extremely important, especially now since they had a match coming soon. Rather than memorizing new moves, it was more practical to get the fundamentals right.

"This is hard," Naruki said as she drank. She wiped her mouth. This level of difficulty made her feel down. Her reason here was to observe the 10th platoon and obtain evidence of their use of the illegal wine.

"Now I fully understand why Layton is so strong. I'm totally exhausted, but you haven't sweated one single drop."

"But you're not trying to become a platoon member, right?"

".....Yeah, but I'm a Military Artist. I'm in the City Police, but I haven't given up the mission of a Military Artist. Besides, sometimes I might have to handle a violent case. Physical strength is still necessary," she regulated her breathing and sighed deeply.

"It's meaningful to come here. I can become stronger. If it's a reason for Military Artists, the reason is enough for me to be here. I understand being weak is a sad thing for a Military Artist. But I

can't fully accept this. I'm not really sure how to express myself clearly."

"......I know."

Although he wasn't too sure on this, he knew.

"I'm the same as you, becoming strong without explicitly wanting to, though I had a reason to become strong, so I've been struggling for that. But since I arrived here, I've lost my reason to keep trying, and this period of time is troublesome."

He wanted to be stronger so he could earn money and feed the children in the orphanage. His wish went out of control without him knowing, wanting to feed all the orphans in Grendan..... Although it turned out that way, it was still a simple reason that sustained him.

"But isn't Layton still here?"

"Um, yeah."

"Layton's here because of certain reasons. You're here, doing your best. Aren't you struggling more compared to when you first started?"

"True. That thing in Grendan's already sorted out."

".....I'm not sure, but you feel strange today," she cocked her head to look at him. "Is something wrong?"

"Um, not really."

"That's not an answer free of worry, Layton."

"Yeah, well, it's OK."

"You're worried. What is it? Can you tell me about it?"

"It's not really something to be worried about, but it's just a feeling I can't turn around.....? It's like that. I haven't yet sorted it out."

A heaviness came from his weapon harness hanging around his waist. Two Dites hung from it. One was Harley's newly adjusted Sapphire Dite, the other was Kirik's Shim Adamantium Dite - a shape known as the Katana.

".....The way you said it, isn't it just a worry?"

"Yeah?"

"If that isn't something you're worrying about, then there's nothing we'd call 'worry.'"

"Um—"

Perhaps it was a worry for him, but how should he resolve it..... considering it like that made it feel like something else.

He was unwilling to handle a katana. If possible, he didn't want to give in. Kirik said this would make him the strongest. Becoming the strongest was critical to a Military Artist. It was the power needed to protect the city. Of course it was natural. If you didn't

become strong, you couldn't protect anything. He fully understood that.

He also knew that strength alone couldn't protect anything.

He could imagine Kirik's agitation and frustration, a Military Artist with a damaged body who couldn't do anything. But Layfon couldn't fully comprehend his situation because his body was in good condition.

In Kirik's eyes, Layfon was probably just an existence for him to let out his frustration on. That in itself was troubling for Layfon, but it could also be that it was Kirik's sincerest wish, the remnants of Kirik's wish to become strong to guide Layfon onto the correct path of a Military Artist.

And on the path that Kirik's made for him was the road sign of the Shim Adamantium Dite. Kirik asked "Why don't you walk the correct path?"

There was an answer to this question. Yes, there was an answer to it. Why didn't he walk that path? But who would accept that answer if he said it? Or maybe someone would accept it. Kirik had asked that question because he accepted it.

"So, Layfon....."

He didn't want to hear it.

"Sorry for making you wait," Harley's vibrant voice filled the training room. Earlier, he had greeted Naruki, handed back Layfon's two Dites and returned to his lab. Now he was back.

"What is it?"

"What's what? Now that we have a new member, isn't it natural for me to show myself more?" Harley gestured. He was holding a textbook on weapon maintenance.

"Naruki's weapon needs to be prepared."

"Ah.....No, I can use this....."

Harley looked at the Dite in Naruki's hand and shook his head.

"That's for the City Police. A City Police weapon isn't suitable for a platoon match."

"Ah, but....."

"It's fine, it's fine. I can make whatever you want. Come."

Eyes sparkling, he grabbed Naruki's hand and dragged her to the research lab.

"What do you want it to be like? A shortstick type? In that case, Nina's type might be more advantageous. Ah, come to think of it, what's this around your waist? A rope? Hmm—a capture and detainment skill, is it? How interesting."

Like a tsunami, Harley's questions seemingly cut down all opposition from Naruki and she was pulled outside. She looked at Layfon pleadingly, but he replied with a "take good care of yourself" expression.

"Well....."

Naruki was gone, leaving Layfon alone in the room, but even without her, he couldn't ignore the case that Formed had left for them.

"Then I'll have to do this," he said and used Kei to eliminate his presence.

She knew when Naruki was introduced to the team.

"Looks like someone's kidnapped him."

After a shower, Felli walked out of the training complex alone. She didn't get to walk with Layfon today. Since it was useless to wait for him, she decided to leave.

She had thought of why Layfon had left.....but she knew by just looking at him. He was always in combat with his true feelings. Even without him saying anything, she could tell by his expression that he was hiding something. To tell the truth, she wasn't that interested. Wasn't interested, because she didn't want to get involved.....But she got frustrated.

Originally she planned to search with the flakes, but she gave up. She had confidence that Nina and Naruki could not detect her flakes, but not with Layfon. She wasn't sure whether she might be found out under normal circumstances, but if Layfon was in battle condition, he would definitely discover her flakes. Layfon's senses were incredible, as if he could sense everything around him.

What would happen if he found Felli's flakes.....

It'd have been good if he just prepared for battle.....

Leaving the training complex with these thoughts in mind, she headed for the tram station. Not that many people were here since the training complex was built in an isolated area. Many Military Artists preferred to run back home, not allowing their bodies to cool down after training. Nina and Sharnid were the same. Layfon tended to take the tram when he was with Felli, but if he were alone, he'd probably have run back like all the others.

Psychokinesists of other platoons tended not to ride the tram either. Although they couldn't use Kei to strengthen their bodies, a lot of them preferred to train their physical side to combat the effects of tension on their bodies during a platoon match.

Although the tram didn't go all the way to Felli's place, she still decided to ride it. She was probably the only person who rode the tram on a daily basis. Many students moved to other areas for work, study and entertainment.

Hence, Felli felt something wrong when she saw someone at the station. The figure sitting on the only chair under the roof stood out vividly with his red hair. Felli didn't recognize him. It wasn't a problem to wear casual clothes outside class time, but it was unusual to change into casual clothes and come back here. A Dite hung from his waist. That was against the school rule. Very few students were given special permission to carry a Dite in their private time, and even so, that was restricted to certain times and locations.

Whether this rule was taken seriously was another question, but a student wouldn't be carrying a Dite so blatantly like this guy.

The feeling wasn't very strong, but the atmosphere was definitely not the same. It was better not to get any closer to him before the tram arrived. No, she'd let him board it first, and she'd wait for the next tram. Either way, a tram was always empty at this hour. She didn't want to ride in a sealed off tram with him.

It felt unnatural to just stand here, so she decided to just turn around and head back to the training complex. All the while, a thought floated in her mind that this was a good reason for her to check on Layfon.

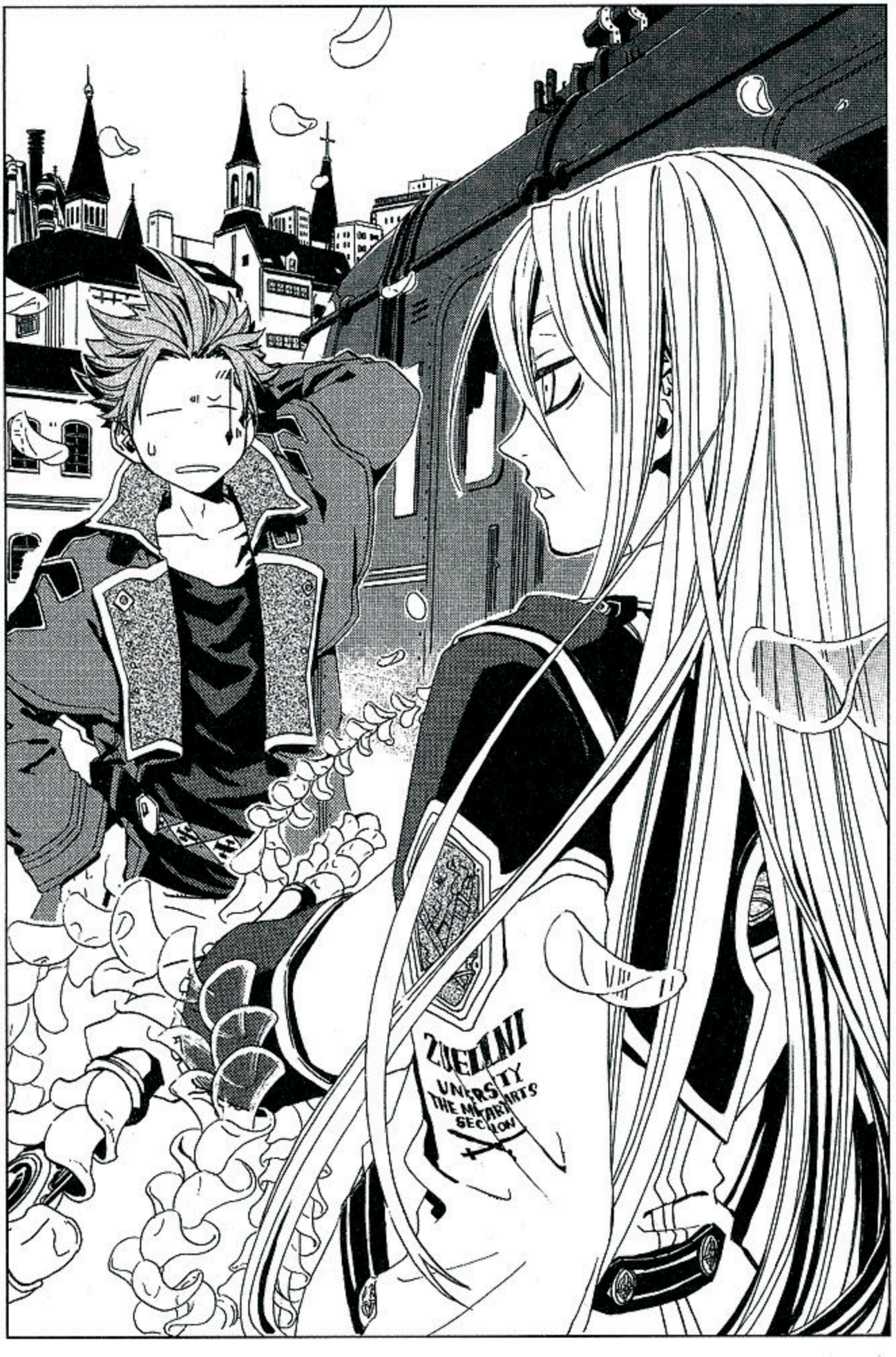
"Are you Felli Loss?"

Somehow, he was standing behind her without her noticing.

"!"

Felli jumped forward and turned around, snatching the Dite from her weapon harness. Restoration. A staff with petal-like scales appeared in her hand.

"Hey, hey, wait up. I didn't do anything."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The young man raised his hands to show he wasn't hostile. His Dite remained in his weapon harness. Even so, Felli scattered the flakes and kept her distance from him. She had instinctively taken this measure.

He was a young man with a strange tattoo on his left face, Haia Salinvan Laia.

"We can't talk when you're so far away."

"I can hear over here. You should be able to hear me too."

Haia wasn't surprised at Felli's voice in his ear. One of the flakes hovered before him.

"This flake contains Psychokinetic explosives. It can cause an explosion and I'm not kidding," she didn't think one explosive could match this Military Artist's speed, so when she put some distance between them, she had scattered a few Psychokinetic explosives around.

"You do think ahead. If not now, I'd really want you to join me."

"I refuse."

"So quick!"

"Well, what is it?"

"Whoa.....Looks like you're the difficult type."

"I don't want to be the type you like."

A tram had come to a stop on the track behind Haia. Someone exited after the door opened.

"Felli!" Karian called.

"Ah, finally here," Haia put out his chest and went to Karian. A girl with glasses that Felli didn't know walked beside him.

"I was troubled that you left first."

"Because I didn't think the talk would end so quickly. Speaking of which, your sister is troublesome, like a cat with a temper."

"Can't judge a person by their looks," Karian concluded.

".....Just, who are these people?"

While demanding an explanation, Felli decided to refuse what Karian was going to say next. It must be something that she wasn't willing to do.

Having hidden his presence through Kei, Layfon sat on the roof above the entrance to the training complex, letting the hours pass.

(Well, what do I do.....)

The 10th platoon seemed to still be in training. Layfon could see their faces if he opened the door, but he'd be discovered, so he strained his ears, hoping to catch Dinn's voice. If Dinn left the room, Layfon would tail him.

He couldn't think of a better way.

What Formed wanted was the location of where Dinn hid the illegal drugs, or some convincing evidence of his taking them.

(Just how I do look for that kind of thing?)

Go into Dinn's room? But thievery probably wouldn't constitute as evidence.

(It would have been easy if all I needed was to go into his room.)

Although he couldn't open a door lock with a needle like a professional thief, it wouldn't be difficult for him to hide his presence through Kei and use his sword to cut open the lock. Then he'd search for evidence..... But, if he couldn't find anything, Dinn'd be more watchful.

If only Naruki was here... but that didn't seem possible for today.

Well then, he'd do some observation work.

(Um--)

Could he do this? Doubt surfaced. It wasn't hard to use Kei for a prolonged period. He could keep this up for an entire day while tailing someone, but what he was worried about was whether this was effective at all. Although Dinn hadn't yet done anything, he probably wouldn't do anything that Layfon expected. Layfon silently planned his possible moves.

No matter what, he couldn't go in and expose the truth like the police. While Layfon was thinking of other ways, Dinn emerged from the building.

(I can only take this way then.)

Same as before, Dinn was with his team members. There were seven people altogether, the full number of people in the 10th platoon. The last person looked to be the Psychokinesist. Layfon could tell by the way he walked. People who trained with weapons had a special way of moving.

It wasn't strange for a student to shave his head, but to even pull out the roots, now that was unusual. Slightly behind Dinn, walking adjacent to him was a beautiful girl that Layfon hadn't seen before.

(Is she the vice captain?)

That must be Dalshena Che Matelna. Rather than describing her as a beautiful adult woman, it was more appropriate to say she had the air of a beautifully crafted statue.

The two of them led on, with the five others following behind.

Layfon was about to jump down from the roof but he suddenly stopped. He saw someone trailing the platoon.

(Captain?)

It was Nina. She didn't say anything after training, and had headed straight for a shower. He didn't think she'd take any action today, but.....She was masking her presence with internal Kei. It wasn't as well done as Layfon's, and it couldn't be compared to Sharnid's, whose presence just simply melted into the air, but she did manage to eliminate her presence.

(At this rate, she'll be exposed.)

From his experience with her in the past, he knew it was useless stopping her now, and if he went up to her to talk her out of it, he'd end up exposing both of them before Dinn.

(I'll keep it the way it is then.)

Having confirmed some distance between them, Layfon jumped down from the roof.

What should he do.....?

Dinn and his team didn't head for the tram. It seemed they were planning to walk back to town. Nina trailed Dinn and Layfon followed behind. Layfon found this situation delicate, and he didn't plan to destroy this balance. Either way, he judged this situation to be disadvantageous.

(If Naruki were here.....)

But Harley had Naruki. Assuming the fact that Harley didn't know anything, he wouldn't let Naruki go so easily. Wondering whether he was doing something that would put his audience into a speechless stupor, Layfon continued to move after the group.

It seemed Dinn and his team were making casual conversation while walking: who had been rejected by whom, who had a new girlfriend, laughter mixed in with the chat. This was normal. It even happened in the 17th platoon sometimes, and the 10th platoon didn't seem to intend to do anything different soon.

The one who acted the bad character like Nina was Dinn.

Layfon found that unexpectedly surprising. He thought the Vice Captain Dalshena would have played that role. The atmosphere she exuded was similar to Nina's, and they were both refined in a way. Beautiful and elegant..... that type of a feeling. To the team members' jokes, she'd reply with a firm attitude.

For some reason, this atmosphere felt similar to Sharnid.

Dinn Dee. Dalshena Che Matelna. Sharnid Elipton. That was the combination in the 10th platoon that had held the strength to threaten the 1st platoon.

Layfon recalled Nina's horrible expression when she heard Dinn's name from Formed. Why was she so surprised and agitated ? Maybe Sharnid.....that might be the answer. No matter what had happened, the truth that Sharnid had left the 10th platoon would

never change. But what had happened between the deep trust of those three people? Layfon didn't know.

What would Sharnid do if he knew about the illegal drug dealing? That guy who was flippant all day long – if he knew.....

(Ah, I see.....)

That was probably what Nina was worried about.

The 10th platoon finally showed signs of dispersing. First it was one person, then the next parted with the team, probably because their dormitories lay in different locations. Finally, Dalshena also left, leaving Dinn alone.

Nina didn't hesitate and continued to trail Dinn. Layfon followed behind them. Formed said Dinn must be the main culprit. His home city was Kelnes, the city specializing in medical herbs. It was one of the few cities to date that hadn't banned the production of illegal wine. Dinn was the only person who would know the ways to import the drug.

Layfon thought Dinn would head back to his dormitory.....As Dinn walked on his own, something else moved.

It was Nina.

"Dinn Dee."

She suddenly removed her disguise and called out, causing Layfon to panic. He was too late to stop her. Dinn turned around and Layfon managed to maintain his Kei around himself to conceal his presence.

"Nina Antalk? What does the 17th platoon want with me?"

Dinn's attitude wasn't friendly. It was close to hatred.

"I have to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to you though. Don't think what you have to say has any value."

"It's very important," she said, as he planned to turn away from her. "Don't take illegal drugs again."

"......What did you say?" he stopped in his tracks and watched her.

"The City Police are watching you. They're looking for evidence. You can still make it if you stop now."

"Don't speak as if you know everything. You don't even have proof and you've already decided I'm in the wrong?"

"It'll be too late if proof is found," she said with anxiety.

Dinn's expression remained cool and cold.

Under these circumstances, to be branded as a criminal, wouldn't he be angry? But not Dinn. Was this enough to show that he really was involved in illegal drug trade?

No, compared to that.....

Why was Nina doing this? She had made him put up his guard.

No.....Things weren't like that at all.

(Looking at this, as if.....)

She was trying to make Dinn come to his senses.

".....Stop. What are you saying?"

"You're damaging your body. Why are you still taking such dangerous things? If it continues, doesn't that mean you won't be able to protect anything?"

"This is for the sake of protecting the city. To win against the 1st platoon. To win a match and get the highest accumulated score. This is significant for authority. If I have neither authority nor reputation when the Military Arts Competition begins, my plan will be useless. That can't happen. That won't win anything. I'm using my way to protect this city. You should understand. We're both strategists in our teams. For the sake of the next Military Arts Competition, don't you think so too?"

"Of course I've thought of it. I did, but I thought I'll support the plan that will truly win the Military Arts Competition."

"Only the result in battles can support a plan. A plan without that is not believable. You're naive."

"No, it's not. Calm and observant insight is needed to find a possible strategy. What we're looking for now are those two things . You can only increase your own power through continuous training. Only through continuous diligence and effort can you have enough confidence to give commands. How can you prove you're right by escaping reality through illegal drugs?"

"You're the one who shattered my dreams. Your way is truly low!" Dinn shouted. Nina held her breath.

"You took away Sharnid with despicable means, and now you're acting all kind and wonderful."

"No, I didn't.....take him away....."

"What can your words do now? If you want to give the police this information, then fine. I'm doing everything to realize my dreams. Only I can protect this city. Tell Sharnid that I'll fulfill that oath even without him."

Dinn turned around. Nina didn't prevent him from leaving.

Layfon had no way of following him, so he stayed where he was and quietly watched Nina's back.

Chapter 4: Outside the Wheel

I can't be forgiven like this.....

"Wow, this is the new Dite....." Layfon sighed. This sigh was aimed at Naruki and her friends, who had come to the library to meet him and to finish their homework. Hanging on Naruki's weapon harness was her usual police baton and Harley's newly made Dite.

"Yeah, I was surprised too. It's only been a night since I joined the platoon. It feels as if something serious has happened."

No. In fact, Layfon had only made this time to meet one person. The other two girls were waiting for Layfon just as usual.

"Yeah, something did happen," Naruki said with a sour expression. She stared at Layfon as if hoping to find out some news. While they went through their homework, she always tried to find a chance to be alone with Layfon. It seemed she hadn't mentioned the real reason behind her joining the platoon to Meishen and Mifi. But that wasn't Layfon's problem. Naruki herself was trying to find the right timing to speak with him.

Even so, Layfon was worried.....

(I can't tell her the Captain's exposed the plan.)

Yesterday's conversation between Nina and Dinn meant little to the two of them, but it was bad news for Naruki, particularly because she worked for the City Police. Layfon had found out that

no one from the City Police had infiltrated the platoons to investigate this case other than Naruki. No one else was tracking Dinn.

(What should I do.....)

Compared to his more relaxed past, Layfon was plagued by worries these days. He cared nothing for how other people viewed him back in Grendan. Of course, he took care not to let anyone know of what he was doing, especially Leerin and his adopted father. Besides that, Layfon hadn't done anything that would draw attention to himself.

(Why can't I act like I did before?)

In the end, Layfon's time in the library was spent feeling pressure and agitation. Still, no matter what, he hoped for the time here to drag on as long as possible. He sincerely wished for the afternoon to stay away. Platoon training was in the afternoon, and he would have to head for the Military Arts Training Complex with Naruki. She'd know of what happened yesterday night.

No matter how hard Layfon prayed, time passed by as it always did, fairly and equally to everyone. The time in the library ended as Layfon finished his homework with loose concentration.

The last hour of lunch also ended, drawing close to the platoon training time. Naruki first announced the hour to part.

Ah, I'm finished.....

"And? How did yesterday go?" Naruki asked the instant that she had parted with Meishen and Mifi. In the face of Naruki's impatience, Layfon realized that he had no way out of this.

(Huh, it can't be helped.)

"Um.....Nothing much happened yesterday."

He wasn't good at lying. That was his decision.

"Really.....I guess it's not easy to catch him red-handed."

(Sorry.)

Layfon smiled forcefully as he apologized in his head.

"Well, this will take time. Getting impatient right now will only be our defeat. Anyway, we just have to do our best."

Do our best. It seemed Naruki had a pressing wish to resolve this case.

"Naruki, what if.....what if that person truly wants to protect this city, so he turned towards illegal means, what would you do?"

"Huh?"

"What if he truly wants to protect this city knowing his true strength is not enough.....so he uses those illegal drugs. What would you do?"

Layfon didn't find Dinn's method despicable. Nina called the want to protect everything in the city selfishness. Nina's ideal was very beautiful, but it wasn't realistic. In an everyday peaceful atmosphere, one would forget the fact that Zuellni was in a dire situation. Nina's determination that supported her wish in this dire time was particularly dazzling. But Layfon knew that kind of thinking wasn't enough. Although the illegal drugs were deplorable, Layfon didn't think Dinn was wrong. Dinn's method was cleverly covered by the excuse of the Military Arts Competition. Like the inevitability of a city's death, it was natural that the people who took part in such a fight were not perfect.

"I've already considered it," Naruki replied, avoiding Layfon's gaze. "He can be called a hero with Zuellni's current situation. Even though his method is illegal, I think no one would directly criticize him. But the truth remains that this is a crime. It's a crime within the Academy City Zuellni. It's forbidden. It's also horrible to his own body. The use of those illegal drugs can speed up the deterioration of the Kei vein."

"Do you know?" Naruki asked Layfon, keeping her back to him. "It's not meaningless to sacrifice one's body to protect the city. This act is tragically beautiful, but I can't accept it. Which one is more important? The city or the people.....If it was me, I'd choose the people. We have other Academy Cities beside Zuellni, so I'll definitely capture him and stop him. If a day comes when something must be sacrificed, if Meishen and Mifi would be sacrificed, I'll save them. So I'll also save Dinn."

The last line was probably Naruki's real feelings. She would never stand still if Meishen and Mifi needed help. Naruki's thinking was what Layfon lacked. He cared less for other people.

He just wanted to protect everyone back at that time.

"Nakki's thinking doesn't fall short of the captain's."

"Nah. I still want to become a Chief. I feel strongly against any illegal acts. To say it more clearly, I neither sympathize nor agree with Dinn's thinking. Bad is bad. I don't believe I'm entirely just. The law isn't perfect, but if we don't abide by it, then human society cannot work properly. So we must not ignore the law. If we want to ignore the law, then it's better if we find someplace to live with no one else around. Am I too cold?"

"Not at all, you're right."

Dinn had said that it was necessary in order to protect the city. Nina had said that the will to protect everything was selfish. Naruki's thinking was different from theirs. She was indifferent to the fate of the city. If Zuellni was destroyed, the people just needed to move to other cities. Naruki had questioned whether the city or the people was more important. Humans were more important, Layfon felt the same as her. Thinking back on how he acted in the past, it wouldn't be inaccurate to say that he was Naruki's comrade . But still, he didn't want to see the Electronic Fairy die. The point that people could move to other cities was troublesome to Layfon. In terms of materials, Layfon didn't have enough money. As a Military Artist, he could move around cities like the Salinvan

Guidance Mercenary Gang, acting like a mercenary, but that wasn't what Layfon wanted to do. Money was still needed to let him move to other cities, whether it was an Academy City or a normal City.

This problem was embarrassing, a problem that couldn't even be compared to that of anyone else's around him, but it was very realistic for Layfon. Hence, he didn't want this current reality to vanish.

However, his existence in Zuellni couldn't guarantee a victory in the Military Arts Competition.

(Ah, I see.....)

He admitted it, finding it strange. As those words surfaced in his mind, he felt that his own problem and his position in this case were too different from others. Whether the problem had anything to do with the City or the people, the fact was that power could solve everything. If Nina and Naruki left this problem to Layfon, then perhaps, everything could be solved.

(Um.....That might not work?)

It probably wouldn't work with people like Nina around. She wouldn't let him shoulder everything. As he thought on it, he found himself nearing the Training Complex, the Training Complex with Nina in it.....

(Ah.....)

A bad premonition flashed through his mind as each step took him closer to confirmation.

"I'm sorry. I contacted Dinn yesterday."

Nina really didn't fail his expectations. He wasn't sure whether it was good or bad. Like yesterday, she had come earlier than anyone else. Felli and Sharnid had yet to show themselves.

Naruki stood stiffly next to Layfon. The trembling of her lips spread out to her entire body.

"Wh, wh, wh, wh, wh....." she failed to get a word out as she watched Layfon. Layfon did say just a moment before that " Nothing had happened."

"Sorry. I lied," he said honestly, lowering his head.

Nina didn't wait for Naruki to recover her composure. "I understand your feelings about having your mission interfered with. Even so, I did what I did according to my principles."

"Uh, wait a minute. Yesterday, that person admitted he was using illegal drugs. Isn't that proof?"

"I didn't tape it. You don't have it either. Besides, I didn't see him taking drugs. That kind of proof isn't convincing enough. Dinn knew that was the case, so he said what he said."

"....."

Nina herself denied her own defense.

"......Then just what did you want to do?" Naruki said, after finally calming herself down. Outrage filled her eyes. "You said you did that according to your principles? Do you know what those principles mean? Isn't that the same as providing the criminal with information to help him evade capture?"

"Probably."

"You're helping the criminal by leaking our information to him.. ...."

"I know, but I must do that. I had a reason to contact him."

"A reason....."

"You mean Sharnid-senpai?" Layfon cut in.

Nina nodded. "I entered the 14th platoon in my first year. It wasn't that strong a platoon. The captain was pretty good, and the relationship between team members wasn't bad. We trusted each other, and we had different abilities to confront different situations , but we didn't make it in the last Military Arts Competition....."

The 14th platoon.....was the team that made Zuellni lose in the last Military Arts Competition. Past memories surfaced in Nina's mind. "In a match last year, we fought the 10th platoon, including Dinn Dee, Dalshena Che Matelna and Sharnid Elipton. They were all one year older than me, in third year. All the members in the 10th platoon were in the 6th year. They took in three third year students, a pretty bold act. Anyone would have thought the 10th platoon was weak, but in fact, they were very strong. Dalshena's stormy attack, Dinn's variations and Sharnid's accurate sniping. That combination covered up each person's weakness. Their attack was overwhelmingly strong. I really admired them. The higher-ups found their custom-made fighting suits arrogant, but to us, it was like the dazzling flag of a new era."

The result was obvious. Sharnid's exit in the second half of the platoon match broke their tri-combo and the 10th platoon was disbanded.

"Dinn's anger was intense. He even declared a duel with Sharnid. Sharnid accepted it but he didn't resist in the duel. He was beaten up. The judge stopped the duel because of the severity of Sharnid's injuries, so severe that it might have resulted in long-lasting effects. It's fortunate that he recovered," Nina sighed, as if she was putting down something heavy in her. Layfon and Naruki kept silent and waited for her to continue.

"I went to find Sharnid after the match. I wanted to form my own team. I could never become strong by staying with the 14th platoon. My desire was deep, very deep.....Because I met her."

"Her" must be Zuellni.

"I talked to Sharnid that I needed him to form a team. It was difficult at first, but he agreed in the end. I also talked to Harley. When I applied to form a new platoon, the newly elected Student President, Karian-senpai, introduced me to Felli."

The 17th platoon had begun operating like that. Layfon's appearance in the second year had enabled the team to become truly active.

"......I took Sharnid from the 10th platoon."

"It wasn't really....."

"Although reality wasn't like that, it still couldn't be permitted in the relationship between those three. I don't know what happened between them, but things wouldn't have turned out like that if Sharnid was just a normal student studying Military Arts."

True. It was very irritating to see a rival walk into one's sight. Although Sharnid had left the team, Dinn couldn't ignore him in a fight.

He couldn't ignore him.

It wouldn't have mattered if the 17th platoon was so weak that it wasn't worth mentioning. The time for the match against the 10th platoon was nearing. When that time came, Dinn's feelings

would be in disorder. On the other hand, if the 17th platoon was too weak, then Dinn might be able to disregard his feelings towards Sharnid.

But that wasn't possible now.

(Yes, because I'm here.)

The 17th platoon was now much more powerful than Nina had anticipated, so powerful that no one would turn his eyes from them. All because Layfon was here. All the team members were powerful, like Nina, Sharnid and Felli, but the team originally lacked a frontline attacker. Nina had trouble finding a Military Artist in Zuellni to fill that role in the 17th platoon.

But everything changed when Layfon entered the Academy City.

A Heaven's Blade successor from Grendan was someone who fought filth monsters alone. Layfon's power wasn't a power that a normal student should have, and his participation in Zuellni brought an intense change to the 17th platoon. Nina could now concentrate on her original work of making and implementing strategies; Sharnid could fulfill his potential according to the situation; and even Felli, who was originally indifferent, had become more serious. The entire team had become stronger because of Layfon's appearance. This turning point was worth celebrating for Karian who planned with all he could to have Layfon enter the platoon, and Nina who strove to protect the City. But it was different for Dinn Dee. Dinn couldn't accept this reality. He couldn't allow the fact that Sharnid had betrayed him and

entered a team that had become strong. Dinn's outrage came from a betrayal of trust. He could not tolerate it.

In the end, Naruki left for the City Police office right after coming to the Training Complex. She was probably going to report this to Formed and ask for further instruction. Entering the platoon and serving as a fake member had probably caused some ripples in Naruki's thinking.

What did Nina think of this?

"It can't be helped now that the situation's become like this," Nina replied like a balloon without air. Her expression hadn't changed during the training hour. She stood balanced on one of the metallic balls spread across the floor, looking as if her heart was somewhere else.

"Hey hey. How come the usual energy's flown out the window? " Sharnid said, having finally arrived.

"You, you're so loud," Nina grumbled, her face red. Sharnid shrugged.

"Oh yes, I ran into Felli-chan earlier. She said she's not coming," he said, then stood on one of the balls and rolled his way to Nina.

"......What?"

"Uh.....well, and I wanted to tell you not to force yourself."

Layfon's heart jumped.

"......What do you mean?" Nina asked.

"Dinn and Layfon's friend entering the platoon. I guess the City Police's caught that guy's tail, right?"

"......You already knew?" Nina said in surprise. Sharnid's smile turned slightly bitter.

"Aren't I the one who knows them the best? I knew just by looking at their performance once. Kei can't possibly increase that much in such a short period of time, right?" he looked at Layfon for confirmation. Layfon nodded in embarrassment.

"Then, are we gonna arrest him?" Sharnid asked as if he was asking about tomorrow's weather.

"You don't find that a problem?"

"No problem. Isn't this the consequence of his actions? It'd be very painful to lose Zuellni, since we all have feelings for it, but I think it's another matter to damage one's own body."

Sharnid's thinking was the same as Nina's.

"Then wouldn't this be a better outcome than losing body and heart?"

"Probably, but....."

"The problem is....."

Sharnid wasn't concerned with Nina's anxiety. His attitude was stronger than before and he had frankly expressed his opinion. He continued. "We cannot allow a scandal to come from the Military Arts course right now. Because of losing the last Military Arts Competition, the seniors are already being looked at with contempt. The juniors can just move to other cities and graduate there, but the seniors are different. They're about to graduate. Losing Zuellni might mean losing their right to their qualifications. If a scandal comes out, then even the Military Arts Leader might be fired. Aren't we at a crucial time period right now? We can use this.....I think it's quite a good idea."

Layfon's eyes widened at Sharnid, who gave his opinion with the attitude of a politician.

"What? Sometimes I use my brain too."

The corner of his lips pulled up mockingly, as if Sharnid had realized that he wasn't acting like himself.

"What do you think, captain?"

"Well, I can't make a judgment," Nina shook her head.

"Same here. If I had known this earlier, then I only needed to talk to one person, Karian-sama."

Layfon heard what Sharnid said, but explaining this to Karian would mean sealing Dinn's fate.

"......Is this really all right?" Nina had the same thought as Layfon. This would eventually get the top people of the City involved. The end result might be a cold-hearted one. After all, Karian became a Student President in order to protect the city. If he were to choose between people or city, he'd definitely choose the city.

"Can't be helped about that, since that guy's in such a situation," Sharnid said.

Sharnid, Layfon and Nina headed for the Student Council, the training mood having dissipated. The female student led them into an empty conference room rather than the Student President's office. Karian appeared not long after.

"Sorry for making you wait. Is there something you want with me?"

"Speaking of that....."

Karian listened quietly to Nina's narration. The scandal of using illegal drugs didn't shake him.

"Then what do you want me to do?" he asked with a smile. No one could tell what he was thinking.

"I don't think you'd want anything to happen in these crucial times," Sharnid answered. "If possible, we want this case to be handled in secret."

"Secret. Ah, I see you haven't had a talk with the Chief of Police. You'll have to talk to him either way.....In truth, this kind of event must not happen in this hour. If it is leaked out, this problem won't just be a news item. The seniors would be in great trouble and Vance might lose his position. And if we don't do anything about this, our right to enter the Military Arts Competition would be questioned. If the Academy union got wind of this, they might withdraw part of or even their entire financial support.....Even if we somehow manage the financial crisis, we'd also lose the contact we need to sell our research data, and that is one big source of income."

Karian had analyzed all the possibilities.....and as one possibility led to a worse possibility, Karian's expression turned more and more serious.

"So what do we do next? That's the question, isn't it?" He looked at Nina for confirmation.

At Nina's nod, Karian smiled. "In that case, good. I'll talk to the Chief of Police and get him to stop the investigation for now."

"But that won't....."

"Not only that of course. You'll have to act. Let me rephrase this, your action is the most important."

"......What do we do?"

"What else is there besides the platoon match? You against the 10th platoon. You must win this match."

"Of course we'll do our best in the match."

"Of course, but don't you have someone who isn't like that?"

All three people turned their gazes to Layfon.

".....Are you telling us to kill him?"

Nina's expression changed. Layfon recalled that this was his way of doing things in Grendan. Yes, that was how he viewed it and so he was neither angry nor confused, and for some reason, he was surprised at himself for calmly analyzing this possibility.

"Student President, that's....."

"No, no. You'd face a huge problem if you did that. People have died in matches in Zuellni, but things couldn't be solved easily if the whole team died," Karian shook his hand in denial.

"Then....."

"We just need something that stops them from maintaining a proper team. It could be an arm or even a leg.....and I don't mean every team member has to be hurt like that. As long as the core of

the 10th platoon sustains injuries that make them unable to fight in this year or for half a year, the 10th platoon loses its fighting power . In that case, I could use the authority of a Student President to disband the team."

"Does that mean wounding Dinn or Shena?" Sharnid said.

Zuellni's level of medical treatment could help heal a broken bone in one week, which meant a broken bone wouldn't be enough to effect the collapse of the 10th platoon. In that case, the 17th platoon needed to destroy the nervous system, as that would need a longer treatment period. But that was difficult. A Military Artist's nervous system was connected to the flow of his Kei vein..... meaning the nervous system was extremely close to that of the Kei's path. The path of the Kei vein flowed naturally to protect the nerves. It wasn't that easy to just destroy them.

"Are you saying we have to hit the head and paralyze the other person for the rest of his life? Isn't that overboard?" Sharnid said angrily.

A hit to the head was extremely serious to a normal person. It was the same to a Military Artist who had his physical body strengthened through Kei. Intense shock received on the head from the outside could cause death, and even if that person didn't die, he would suffer serious side effects. Zuellni's medical treatment was not enough to treat that kind of an injury.

"It'd be troublesome if we fail to do that. If it really doesn't work , all we can do is add a few crimes on their heads and exile them..... .but things like being exiled are large enough punishments to

cause a scandal. Besides, we don't know whether Dinn would abide by the Student Council's decision."

"It probably won't work. It's Dinn's style to reach his end with any means once he's made his decision. He's probably working underground and gathering people who think like him.....Things like that."

"Yes. In fact, he might become the next Student President. He's clear-headed and acts on his decisions. He might make a good leader, though his intense sense of mission could cause problems. The Vice Captain Dalshena is elegant and popular. If she becomes an adviser.....Perhaps the combination of her being the Student President and Dinn holding the real power could be a very good match. It's a shame that it's impossible."

"Aah.....That would really suit them," Sharnid agreed.

"I think it'd be even better if that combination included you."

"Joining the Student Council is too much for me."

"Really? You can do what they can't. Don't you think that's very important to them?"

"Not at all," Sharnid tossed down his comment and turned around as if the topic wasn't worth discussing anymore.

"Never mind. It's meaningless to talk about that now. Coming back to the topic, the problem is Layfon-kun. Can you do it or not..... That's the question. Can you?"

"....."

"Can you injure him so he needs more than half a year of medical treatment?" Karian asked.

"......Layfon," said Nina.

Layfon couldn't answer them. Should he say he can or that he can't.....He could achieve both answers.

"Layfon, if you can't do it, then just say you can't," Nina said, as if she was entreating him to give such an answer. Although Layfon made a decision to come here himself, he had become confused in the face of Karian's calm analysis.

Clearly, Layfon showed unwillingness for this outcome. He could only answer like this.

"Sure."

But the answer came from someone else.

The answer that came from the direction of the door caused Layfon to stand up and snatch out his Dite. He had heard that voice before.

"Eavesdropping is a bad hobby," Karian said to stop Layfon short.

"Oh, excuse me, but I can't help it. This topic is interesting. Besides, I've something to say to someone in here," the person who voiced the answer for Layfon strode into the conference room.

"Haia....."

It really was him but his presence wasn't the only surprising factor.

"Felli.....senpai?"

A girl Layfon didn't know stood beside Haia, and standing next to that girl was Felli with a troubled look in her eyes.

"Wh.....Who are you people?" Nina said with her guard up. Haia and the other girl didn't look like they were students.

"I'm Haia Salinvan Laia, the leader of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang..... I think that's enough introduction. What do you think?"

"What did you say?"

It seemed Nina hadn't heard of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang. She glanced at Layfon with a doubtful expression, showing that she knew Haia had something to do with Grendan.

"Why do you think he can do it?" Karian asked after a sigh.

"The Psyharden technique can do it. Don't you know? The highly difficult skill in External Type Burst Kei. It's also a common technique used in different schools under different names."

"That.....I do know," Nina nodded, hiding her surprise at Haia's sudden appearance.

"But that's a move to wound all inner organs. If we use that....."

"Yes. Well, that move is pretty interesting if it's used against the head."

"He'll die" Karian frowned.

"Ah, Kei is a move that affects a large area, so normal defensive mechanisms never work. At least, Zuellni shouldn't have any such mechanisms to defend against Wolfstein using that move."

"What do you want to say?" Karian urged.

"Wolfstein and I.....I mean the previous Wolfstein. We have both inherited the Psyharden technique. It's impossible that Wolfstein can't use a move that I know. Besides, he's a Heaven's Blade successor. He lived till now because he was a Heaven's Blade successor. He managed to survive and defeat filth monsters because he continuously created and altered the Psyharden technique. His technique is one that he has honed through many battles against other Military Artists."

Haia watched Layfon. Layfon.....was unable to take that gaze head-on. The weight of the Dite in his weapon harness felt heavier.

"You're the apprentice of my Master's older brother (older brother in the school, not blood related). He's inherited the name of Psyharden in Grendan. It's impossible that you can't use that move. You can, can't you? Using Houshintotsu."

"What kind of a move is this Houshintotsu?" Karian asked on behalf of everyone else in the room besides Layfon.

"It's simply a move that turns Kei into needles and hits the Kei vein with them. That way, the effect of the needles spreads out to the entire body, including the nervous system. It's similar to the needles that the doctors use on Military Artists. This isn't medical treatment but Houshintotsu that was created through Military Arts ."

(Speaking of the unnecessary.) Layfon thought.

He could no longer say that he couldn't do it. If he said that, then the move would have become a move that Derek taught him in secret. And that would bring huge shame on the Psyharden School. A person who carried the name of the school bore the meaning that he would teach the next generation the Military Arts without keeping anything back himself. Layfon wouldn't let Derek carry such shame even though he was no longer in Grendan.

"But....." Haia said, as if wanting to say more.

(Stop.) Such a thought yelled in Layfon's head, but he failed to give voice to it.

"But I don't know whether you can execute Houshintotsu perfectly using a sword. Psyharden's technique is made for the Katana. You can't execute that move with a sword. Might be better for you to try using Whirl Kei moves."

"So.....It can be solved with a Katana?" Karian asked.

Layfon didn't reply. All he was doing was suppressing the anger rising inside him.

(It's the same with him and the same with him.....)

This guy and that guy, they were all trampling over the deepest part of Layfon, whether it was Kirik or Haia. Checking the atmosphere around him, Layfon decided to swallow his words. But.....Was he just going to let.....

"Excuse me....." Nina raised her hand slowly. "Although it's not suitable for me to say this, but can you give us some time?"

"No problem. What do you think, Sharnid?"

".....Sure."

"Since you want more time, then I'll wait, but I wish you'd give me an answer before the match. I'll talk to the City Police, but that won't last long."

"I know."

Nina's angry countenance surfaced in Layfon's mind, but right now, his head was too full to take in that kind of a worry.

"Ah, Layfon-kun, please stay behind for a sec," Karian said.

"What is it?"

"I've something to talk to you about. Please just stay behind for a few minutes."

"What?" Nina asked.

"It could be something very important. You know I wouldn't talk to Layfon about something irrelevant in this situation," Karian said to Nina, who regarded the Student President with caution.

"It's all right. Please go ahead, Captain," Layfon said.

"......OK," Nina left the conference room, looking back every step she took to the exit. Layfon still felt her gaze the moment she closed the door.

"......So, what's the situation?"

Layfon faced the people left in the room with his back to the door. Never mind.....Karian and Felli. The people Layfon took notice of the most were Haia and the girl beside him.

"Ah, um.....Nice to meet you. I'm Myunfa Rufa," Myunfa greeted him.

"Are you from the Mercenary Gang?"

"Yes....." Myunfa said. She fled back to Haia's side after having introduced herself. She exuded an air like Meishen, but Layfon wiped away that thought.

"Student President, Haia is suspected of helping transport the illegal drugs."

"Didn't we already take care of that, Wolfstein? Right, why did you call me by my name?" Haia smiled beside Karian.

"I'm not a Heaven's Blade successor any more," Layfon glared at him.

"I know, so sometimes you act like you were back at home, right ? You're just a normal person here, and you're a student too. Shouldn't you be more mindful of the manner you address your senior, Layfon?"

Sparks flew off from above their heads in an instant. Layfon had already snatched out and restored his Sapphire Dite. Haia also had his Dite ready.

".....I won't hold back this time."

"Just as I wanted. I want to see whether those weak moves of yours can work against me without using a Katana."

Both Layfon and Haia held their weapons ready, about to leap at each other.

"Stop there!" Karian said. "Haia-san, I'll have to go back to what you did before if you go overboard with a student here."

"That'd be troublesome."

"Layfon too, take back your sword. Your attitude's too lax even though you've been provoked."

"....."

Wordlessly, Layfon retreated a step back as Haia did so. Both of them slid their weapons back into the weapon harnesses.

"Just as you said, Haia, the Mercenary Gang had nothing to do with the illegal drug dealings. This'll be announced as such publicly. At the same time, you must provide us with any information related to the illegal drugs. Is that all right?"

"I guess so, but I think the secret transportation of drugs will probably stop."

"Why?"

"Because the Mercenary Gang will destroy them. Since the contract's finished, it'll be too foolish of us to allow any secret police to expose those illegal sellers and let them get hold of any evidence against us," Haia said simply. His casual attitude in a reply full of blood and murderous intent made Karian swallow.

"Well then, what do you want with me?" Layfon asked Karian, not at all surprised at Haia's reply. Layfon just wanted to get his business done and leave this room.

"It's me who wants to talk to you."

".....I know."

Layfon knew that Haia's presence meant he must have business dealing with Karian. Besides, Felli had mentioned how she would assist Karian even though she hated him. This must also have something to do with Haia's goal. As he thought of this, Layfon felt new anger rising in his chest.

"I want to hear from you about it, since you're the only one who witnessed it. Either way, I want to hear it from you."

"Witnessed?" Layfon watched Haia cautiously, not sure what he meant. "What do you mean?"

"You saw it right? That amazing creature that's beyond common sense, appearing in that ruined city? It's very dangerous for that thing to be there, so I'm here to make a trade. As payment, we'll protect this city from filth monsters. Let's do a fair and square trade."

Sitting inside the cake shop, Naruki was feeling terrible. Mifi was there too, staring at her friend with wide eyes.

"What's wrong?" Meishen said. Mifi and Naruki had been sitting at the table till it was time to close the shop. The cake in front of them was from the shop owner's goodwill. Mifi and Naruki had helped clean the kitchen as gratitude and then sat back at the table to eat the cake.

"It's nothing much, really," Naruki said listlessly.

"Can't see anything wrong from her at all," Mifi shrugged.

"Did you fight with Formed?"

Meishen, who had her hair tied behind her, was moving around as she helped clean and tidy up the shop. Mifi watched her and continued, "Or did you fight with Layfon? You can't do that for Mei's sake."

"That.....isn't it," Naruki raised her voice.

"Then what is it?"

"Something to do with work. This has got nothing to do with Mi ."

"Ah, you're so cold."

"It's not a problem of being cold and not cold?"

"How about telling us your troubles?"

"Uh....."

"Never mind. I'm joking."

"If it's you....." Naruki shot her a tired glare. Mifi laughed, finding Naruki's expression funny.

"Well, it was a joke, but right now, you look the same as Layton when he first entered the Academy."

"As for that....."

"If you have something you want to do, then do it. This is your childhood friend's advice."

Mifi, Meishen and Naruki grew up together in the Traffic City Joeldem, so Mifi knew Naruki's personality. The way Mifi phrased her advice made it hard for Naruki to refuse.

"Really.....Thanks."

"So? What is it?" Curiosity burst from Mifi's face.

Naruki looked at her with suspicion. She sighed and opened her mouth. "Actually....." She didn't speak in details, but she did say that she entered the platoon for some specific reason. She told Mifi that it would be problematic if she let her know what that reason was. Mifi didn't mind. The journalist-aspired student was able to judge what should and what shouldn't be reported. If she reported

this, even Naruki had to bear the responsibility. Mifi would never do anything to betray her friend.

"But I just received the order to stop the investigation."

"Why?"

"How am I supposed to know? But the higher-ups have given that order. Since the Chief of Police gave that order, we can't do much about it."

"Meaning this is something to do with politics."

"Exactly. I hate this."

"Um....." Mifi stuffed cake into her mouth. Since Naruki had to investigate by joining a platoon, then this case must be related to the platoons.

"So the one who wants the investigation stopped is either the Military Arts Commander or the Student President?"

"What?"

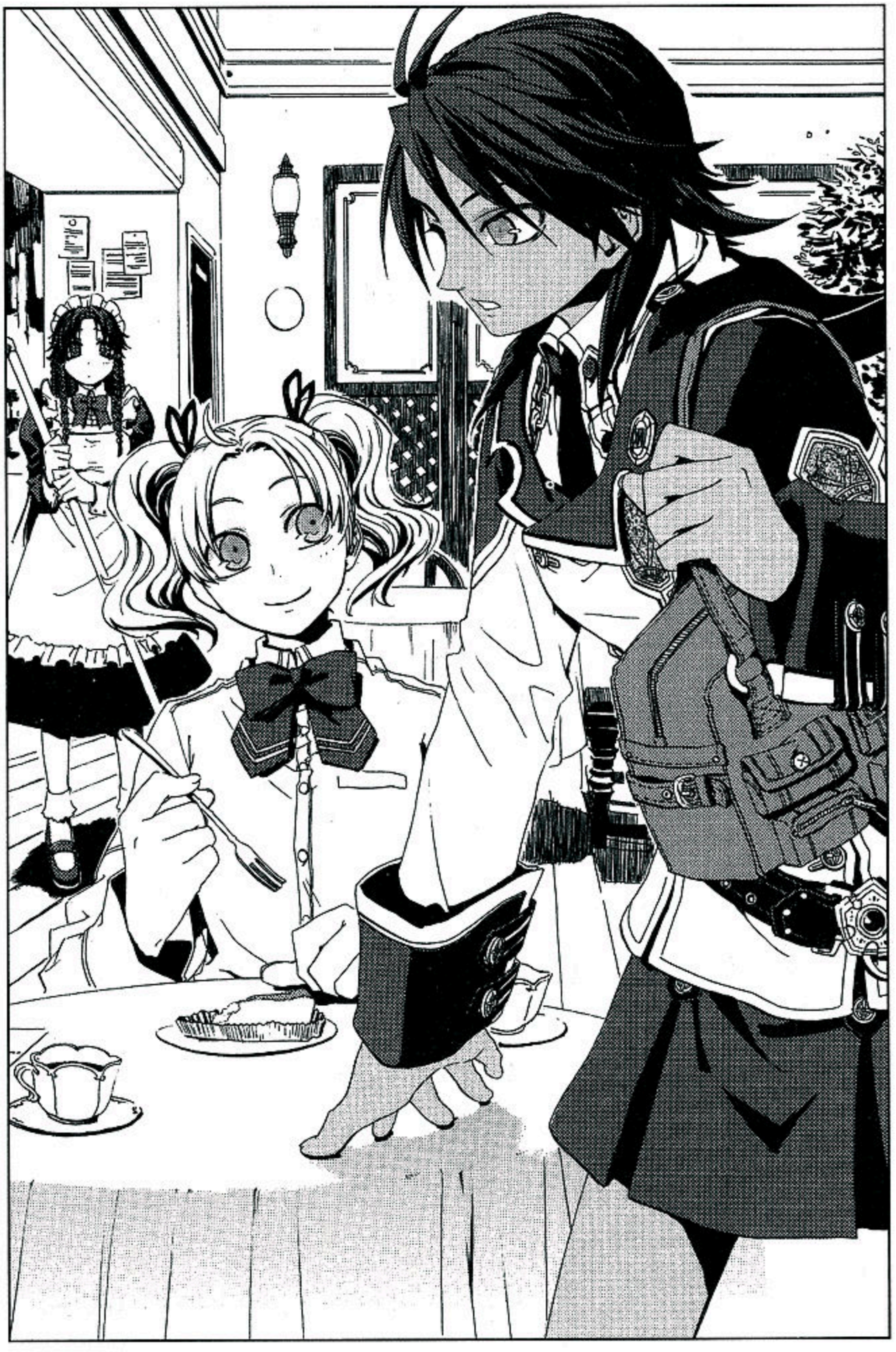
"The Military Arts Commander has the authority to appoint the Chief of Police, and to dismiss him too. The Student President is the other person who can get the Chief of Police to do this and that . When it comes to politics, it has to be one of those two."

"Right....."

"Perhaps those two think that it'll bring huge trouble if they were to publicly announce this case. I don't know the Student President and the Military Arts Commander, and I don't quite understand how they work. Do you feel the same?"

"Yeah.....About that....."

"It's ok if you can't say it," Mifi concluded, stopping Naruki from saying more. "What happens next is no longer part of your duty. Normal criminal charges can't solve a political problem."



"That's why I'm angry," Naruki said with a bitter expression.

"So what do you plan to do?"

".....Plan to do?"

"Isn't this obvious. The platoon."

"Just pretend nothing's happened. Isn't that matter of fact?" Naruki only entered the platoon to assist in the investigation. Since the investigation was stopped, it was meaningless for her to stay in the platoon. But Mifi thought differently.

"Humph.....Really? Just like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Though you can't investigate, can't you still observe? The Student President won't let this go if the situation turns extremely serious. If that happens, how would this person be handled? Isn't that something you should watch out for? Whether you sit and watch with us from a distance or observe from somewhere close..... .... You don't really need me to point that out, do you?"

"Right.....So that's a way too....." Immersed in her thoughts, Naruki quickly stood up. "Sorry, I've got to go. You head off first."

Naruki left the shop.

"Mi....." Meishen had heard the conversation. She was standing beside their table, holding a mop. "Were you encouraging her?"

"Um? Yeah, probably. It felt different though."

"Huh?"

"Because Layton's team doesn't have enough people, and they're worrying about that? Nakki needs to be on her feet."

"Mi....."

Mifi smiled at her. Meishen had spaced out.

"How about it? Since I've helped Layton, why don't you treat me to another cake?"

"Don't go overboard," Meishen blushed and threw the handle of the mop at Mifi.

Yes, this was pretty difficult.

Chapter 5: The vow on that day

The day of the match had arrived. Zuellni had finished its resupply. The Student President said they'd spend the next two to three days tidying things up, then continue moving.

Although they couldn't see the War Field, the enthusiasm of the audience had reached the room. Layfon found it unbelievable that he would see the day where Naruki was frowning in the waiting room for a platoon match.

"Are you all right?"

"Seems I have some problems," Naruki made some noise, exhausted. She let out a heavy breath, her hand covering her face. Layfon understood that feeling. A feeling of being unable to control her consciousness. Although she had returned to the platoon in order to observe, she still needed to adapt to some areas .

The atmosphere on Layfon's side was also heavy. Today, he had to defeat Dinn and Dalshena. He knew he didn't have to kill them. He just had to inflict injuries on them that would make them lie in the hospital for more than half a year. And to do that, he had to use a Katana. Psyharden techniques had to be executed with a Katana. To make it clear, a sword could also be used, and for Layfon who excelled at Military Arts, he might be able to do it with a sword. But a sword wouldn't allow him to reach the same level as a Katana. It might mean inflicting more severe wounds

than intended, wounds that might never heal. Pressure weighed down on Layfon. Having been taught the skill of a Katana, handling a sword was not within his field.

(This isn't my first day using a weapon outside my field. But.....)

It was the same when he took on the title of the Heaven's Blade successor. The Heaven's Blade he received had the form of a sword , and that was how Layfon fought. However.....

(I still have to use a Katana in the present.)

As a human, he was embarrassing. And not just that.....

"Layfon....."

It was Nina's voice. Her face didn't wear that dominating expression that she always donned in platoon matches. In other words, even Nina couldn't approach today's fight with her usual self.

"Are you all right?"

The question he asked Naruki before was now directed at him. Layfon could only smile bitterly.

The student acting as communicator headed over to them to relay a command. Without a word, Nina followed that student. Sharnid patted Layfon's shoulder and followed Nina's example. Next came Naruki. Layfon slowly sat up and kept a distance from them. Felli walked over to him.

"Fon Fon."

A soft, everyday greeting. The usual Layfon would have worried about Nina and the others hearing this name of his, but he felt nothing today. For some reason, he didn't worry about it at all. He didn't know exactly why he was like this today. Fighting with a Katana, the conversation he had with Sharnid yesterday, Nina's determination, and Haia's goal.....All sorts of things flew through his head, leaving no room to agonize over Felli's greeting.

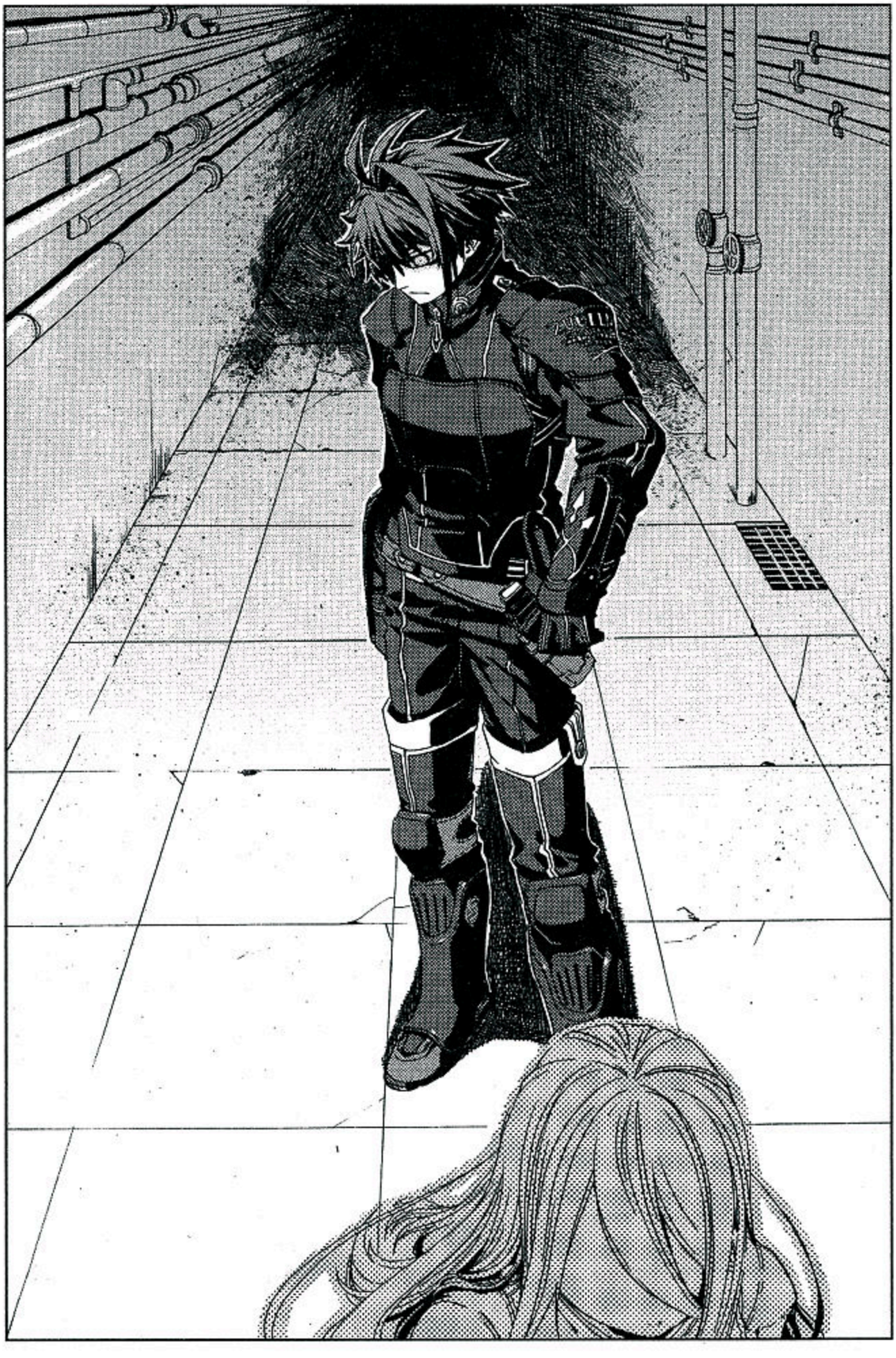
But Layfon answered as usual. "What is it?"

Felli cocked her head. Layfon couldn't tell the meaning behind her expressionless face.

"What is Haia's goal?" she asked.

"He probably wants to hunt down that thing, but....."

What did he intend to do once he caught the thing? Neither Layfon nor Felli knew.



That thing was the goat that Layfon met in the ruined city. It said something curious to him and then disappeared. Layfon suspected the goat was the one who buried all the dead in the city.

Nina speculated that the goat was the city's consciousness, the Electronic Fairy. Her speculation was spot on.

Haikizoku. Haia called it by that name. Having gone insane, the Electronic Fairy underwent a change, freed itself from the city and went on a rampage.

Haia said he had to do something about it, so he wished for Karian's help.

Layfon didn't know why Haia infiltrated Zuellni just to obtain the Haikizoku. He was suspicious of Haia's promise to repay their help by protecting Zuellni from filth monsters for a year.

Zuellni had nothing to lose, and that deal was just too good to be true. Layfon had too many things to think about. He had no room to speculate on Haia's goal.

"I don't know," was his only answer.

Felli appeared displeased at his reply. She deliberately walked up to Layfon and kicked him.

"What was that for?"

"I was careless," she left.

"Just what's with her....." Well, since it was Felli's kick, it didn't hurt that much, but he had no idea what he did to make her mad. No time for that now. Light flooded his entire vision.

The match was about to begin. Layfon's hand moved automatically to the weapon harness hanging around his waist. The Sapphire Dite and the Shim Adamantium Dite.....Sword or Katana. Layfon's hand stopped, hovering and hesitating.

The female voice of the commentator cut through the war field. This time the 10th platoon was on the offensive while Layfon and his team defended their flag. The 17th platoon had the disadvantage of being a small team.....Mifi had said that before. The biggest reason behind it was that the 10th platoon was also best at attacking, just like the 17th platoon.

The siren rang to signal the start of the match. The audience fell silent, holding their breath as a collective whole as the 10th platoon took action.

Dalshena rushed straight for the enemy team with her lance, ignoring the attacks from the Psychokinesist. She strove forward with the innocent belief of winning against many enemies all by herself. Dalshena's image showed on the huge screen opposite the

audience stand. Dense golden curls danced with the wind. Dalshena wore a fighting suit that had seen many battles. The color of white outlined the edge of a red top that stretched down like a dress behind her. The image of it advancing in a half flying style was like Dalshena riding and controlling a powerful beast.

But there was a reason behind Dalshena's lone attack. A figure followed behind her like her shadow. Dinn. He held a number of ropes in his hand. They looked like Layfon's steel threads, but they were thicker and fewer in number. A sharp hammer adorned the ends of each rope. Dinn controlled those ropes as he moved to carve a path before Dalshena. Any enemy that came close would have to deal with those ropes first. Behind Dinn were four other team members, and the six of them moved together to cover for Dalshena's attacks. The 10th platoon was best at this type of formation.

(Can you see!?) Dinn thought as he and his team moved through the war field. He still hadn't seen anyone from the 17th platoon. They probably planned to hold a decisive fight at their own camp. Dinn laughed at such a cowardly strategy.

(We can do it even without you!)

Dinn wasn't the type to overestimate his own ability. His growth in the four years he spent in Zuellni wasn't much. When his body growth was at its peak, his skill in Military Arts hadn't seen much improvement. This fact plagued Dinn the most. For him to catch up to Dalshena's speed and wield the ropes at the same time, he needed the illegal drugs. Both Dalshena and Sharnid excelled in abilities that differed from Dinn. While knowing those

two from years 1 to 3, both Dalshena and Sharnid had grown exponentially. Dinn couldn't have been able to flank those two if not for his invention of this weapon. He called himself fortunate to have met those two.

But Sharnid betrayed him.

(Did you see that!?)

Inside Dinn, he screamed painfully. The three of them formed the best formation, but Sharnid had to destroy it, declaring the formation meaningless.

"Shena! We'll get past them like this," Dinn called.

Dalshena didn't reply, instead, she increased her speed. She penetrated any obstacles ahead. The light of Kei encircling her lance pierced through the war field like a beast's fang. Once they went past the trees, they'd see the camp of the 17th platoon.

And a change happened right then.

At the time when they were about to clear the trees, the ground exploded. Dinn's ropes and the Psychokinesist's flakes failed to detect the traps since they weren't set in the direct path of the 10th platoon.

"No harm done. Keep going!" Dinn called to ease Dalshena's worry.

But the aim of the explosion wasn't to stop the 10th platoon. The explosion resulted in a smoke screen that covered half of the war

field. The Psychokinesis-supported camera failed to pierce through that smoke screen. The screen for the audience stand showed nothing but smoke, proof that the smoke screen covered a huge area.

"It's coming. Watch out."

The targets were the team members at the back of the formation . Dinn had read the meaning behind the smoke screen and the direction of the attack. But to lower the visibility of the 10th platoon and the audience was.....

The Psychokinesist conveyed to the 10th platoon the movements of the 17th platoon. Nina Antalk the Captain, Layfon Alseif, the new member and the Psychokinesist Felli all stood before the flag. Only Sharnid had gone missing from the start of the match. It seemed he was masking his presence through Kei and hiding in areas that the Psychokinesist could not detect. For snipers to attack from a distance, leaking their position was the same as having their plan read like an open book, so they underwent a lot of Kei training. Sharnid did well in that area.

No, Dinn should say that no Military Artist in Zuellni was as excellent a sniper as Sharnid.

"Careful. Don't get sniped," Dinn advised, thinking of which person in his team would become the target of Sharnid's first bullet . Best not be Dinn himself and Dalshena. He stepped back and used the other team members as his shield. Failure was imminent if he fell here, so other members didn't object to Dinn's move. Dalshena was responsible for attacking, and if she fell, the

attacking power of the team would fall drastically, but she didn't mind Dinn's move either. She continued to rush forward as if she was receiving an attack. A gap appeared between her and Dinn.

It was too late by the time the Psychokinesist reported the movement of the 17th platoon. An attack came from the front right hand corner of the 10th platoon, as if to tear apart the team.

It was Layfon.

As the smoke screen spread out, Layfon's Whirl Kei separated Dalshena from Dinn.

"Go!" Dinn roared at Dalshena. He thought Layfon was here to suppress him and the rest of the 10th platoon, leaving the other members of the 17th platoon to finish off Dalshena. That was Nina's plan, a strategy that took advantage of Layfon's excellent abilities. If Dalshena fell, it'd be a five versus three situation. Very disadvantageous for the 10th platoon. But Dinn was confident in Dalshena's attack power. Nina Antalk was good at defense, but she was nothing before Dalshena's lance. The new member of the 17th platoon was there to make up for the numbers, and as for Sharnid? Dalshena would have no problem repelling his bullets.....At that time, Dinn found the other flow of Kei, his timing a bit slower than others because Layfon had blocked his path.

"Sharnid!" Dalshena's surprise and outrage drifted to Dinn's ear.

Layfon headed to an audio-visual room of the Military Arts Training Complex on the day before the match. Sharnid had called him over to watch something. The Training Complex contained a number of audio-visual rooms because if the equipment was placed in the training rooms, the platoons might end up destroying them during training. Room 2 was locked. Layfon didn't see any key around.

"Oi, sorry for that."

Layfon never thought of analyzing his opponents so he had never entered an audio-visual room before. White tiles covered the floor of the audio-visual room. In the room were chairs and a large screen. The purpose of this room was to show the records of previous matches so the team watching the records could use them to plan their strategies. Sharnid had put together two chairs like a bed and lay on it to watch the screen.

The screen showed a match of the 10th platoon. Dalshena's valiant attack was enlarged. Nina's DV skill didn't do much as the shaking in the screen intensified. Either way, normal DV skill was unable to capture the high-speed movement of a Military Artist.

Layfon tried his best not to look at the screen. It was because if he didn't watch it, he would keep his guard up. He wanted to have a fair and square fight with her tomorrow. Normally, he wouldn't

deliberately opt for a fair fight, but tomorrow was different. This was why he had chosen to sit opposite Sharnid rather than opposite the screen.

Layfon didn't know everything. All he knew was that Sharnid used to be very good friends with Dinn and Dalshena.

"Shena's not part of it."

"Huh?"

"The illegal drugs....."

"You sure?"

Layfon didn't know whether Dalshena was part of it, but Dinn, the captain, was using illegal drugs. It was natural to think that all the members of the 10th platoon had taken them.

"So you think she doesn't know?"

In this case, Layfon wouldn't have to fight against Dalshena, and that fact put him at ease.

Sharnid shook his head. "I think she knows. She understands the current Dinn more than me. She couldn't have been oblivious to Dinn's change. Really....." He bit his tongue and rapped his toes with a knuckle.

"What a good person. To have fairness as her motto but at the same time lying about being a knight. She works with a double standard when her comrade breaks that motto. She wants to

investigate but can't make a decision. Of course she fails to find anything. What an unsightly coward." Sharnid's voice was extremely cold. Layfon took care not to annoy him.

"Listen here. We knew each other since year 1. We weren't in the same class, but we were in the same team in Military Arts class for one on one fight training. We've been partners since then. Having the same goal, like idiots. The captain of the 10th platoon took notice of us at that time. He was a good person. We thought of fighting for that person. We thought of that in our youth..... That person was very sad when Zuellni lost in the last Military Arts Competition. He cried for being unable to do something for the place he liked the most. Seeing him like that, we swore to protect Zuellni with our hands," Sharnid sighed.

To protect Zuellni. It was the same oath as Nina's. Sharnid was different from Nina in that he stood in the field of the Military Arts Competition as a member of a platoon. Other than that, there wasn't any difference between the two.

"But then our relationship was already cracking at the time when we swore together."

Surprised, Layfon kept quiet. What was Sharnid about to say?

"It was pretty simple. Dinn was the captain. Shena's feelings for Dinn, my feelings for Shena.....It was a romance of a mouse waving its tail. Dinn was the captain. Shena swore because of Dinn , and I swore because of Shena. I already understood our relationships at that time. Even so, I still thought I had a chance. I hid my feelings and suppressed them. I swore to cover them and I

lied to myself. I entered the platoon in my 3rd year and participated in the matches. We did pretty well. We fought for our own goal, and because of that, we succeeded. But I'm a sniper. I observed the field from a distance. I thought from an objective viewpoint and realized this relationship would eventually collapse . Someone wouldn't be able to keep at it. It might be all right for Dinn, but it was different with me and Shena."

So Sharnid must have been the first one who couldn't keep at it? That must be what happened.

"".....This is the result of that guy's weakness, and also the thing that I destroyed by leaving halfway. We should have broken that relationship in a clearer way. It was my failure to break that relationship."

Could.....Sharnid have joined Nina's team to make up for that failure?

"Layfon," Sharnid said.

"Have you decided?"

"".....Yes."

On that day, Layfon conveyed his thoughts to the Student President.

"".....Can you leave Shena to me?" Sharnid asked.

Layfon nodded to that request without resistance.

"Sharnid~" she called, wondering what he was planning. Sharnid had appeared before her, in a position that a sniper should never be in. He held two guns instead of a sniper rifle.

"Do you plan to receive my attack with such a toy!" Blood rushed to Dalshena's face. What she couldn't tolerate the most was Sharnid's fighting suit. A custom-made suit, the same type as Dalshena and Dinn's. It was designed for the three of them at the time when Sharnid and Dalshena joined the 10th platoon.

Sharnid laughed. "Whether it's a toy or not, is up to your body." He readied his fighting stance and attacked.

Kei ran from his hands to the Dites and shot forth with the bullets. The bullets flew towards Dalshena with a speed that exceeded that of an External Type Kei. Dalshena changed her route and jumped to avoid them.

A variation of External Kei – Hairoushou. A sound like an explosion shot from Dalshena's back. She used the momentum of that explosion to rush at Sharnid. Sharnid retreated as the ground shattered and the smoke danced apart.

"Ku!"

Surrounded by smoke, Dalshena looked awkward. The ground of the war field should not be like this under normal humidity. There were more dust and sand than smoke.

"Did you change the quality of the soil!?" she called, unable to see anything clearly.

Nina had previously buried bags of dry sand in the field to delay Dalshena's attack and blur the visibility. The flow of External Kei filled Dalshena's surroundings, keeping the sand from falling. Sand and dust covered a large part of the war field.

"Damn."

She had lost Sharnid in the dust and sand. She couldn't sense his presence. Sakkei. Sharnid was masking his presence and was looking for an opportunity for a surprise attack.

"Where are you!?" She narrowed her eyes. It was difficult to open them because of the sand in the air. She kept still and raised the lance.

She moved.

"Over there!"

Her lance swiped like that.

"Tsk."

On her right, Sharnid jumped back with his guns crossed before him. He failed to maintain Sakkei in the split second when he shot the Kei bullet.

"As I thought, it's not easy."

"Don't underestimate me."

Dalshena's lance stabbed towards him. Sharnid bent down and stepped inside her range, blocking her lance with his right gun as he pointed forward with his left. Dalshena twisted around as he pulled the trigger. The bullet brushed past her clothes. She retreated. But Sharnid followed close to her as if his right hand was attached to the lance. The clash of Kei from the lance and the gun gave off a huge amount of green sparks. If Sharnid wanted to aim with his left gun, Dalshena would use her bare left hand to change the direction of his gun.

The two of them attacked and defended in a fight that weaved them together.

"Sharnid, why?" Dalshena asked because they were stuck together. Of course, this would loosen her concentration on her opponent.

"Because you're an idiot."

"What?"

"You knew but you did nothing. Does that make you an idiot?"

Dalshena's expression changed. She probably thought of Dinn and the use of illegal drugs.

"Then this plan is....."

Dust and sand covered the war field.....This setup was overboard just for a strategy planned against the 10th platoon. It was probably made to hide what was happening from the audience.

"Exactly," Sharnid signaled with his eyes.

"Why didn't you stop him?" he asked.

"And you have the right to say that!?" External Kei shot from Dalshena's entire body, preventing Sharnid from getting closer.

"Why do you think it turned out like this? Sharnid, it's all because of your betrayal!"

"The oath? Does our oath have that much value? Shena, did you make that oath because it came from your heart?"

"....." She couldn't answer.

"You should understand. Our oath was not genuine. It was an excuse made through our feelings."

"Shut up!"

She attacked and stabbed with all her strength. Sharnid was forced to take evasive maneuvers, his body very close to the

ground. He climbed up and immediately readied himself. But Dalshena ignored him and kept moving. Her attack was a feint. Her real aim was to meet up with Dinn.

"I won't let you."

Sharnid pulled the trigger, aiming for Dalshena's leg. His sniper rifle would have done well at this distance but what he held now were guns that were designed for physical attack. Black alloy for close combat. The conductibility of Kei was reduced so Sharnid couldn't shoot as accurately as when he was using a Dite made of lighter alloy. The bullet exploded beneath Dalshena's feet. It didn't hit her but it did stop her.

"I won't let you go."

Sharnid sped up to block her, once again entering a close range fight.

"Do you really think this is all right, Sharnid?"

"There's no right or wrong. Didn't he choose his own ending?" Sharnid called, leaping over the lance and returning an attack.

"Dinn really thinks of the city. Perhaps I did feel something for him at the beginning, but we now fight for the city."

"I know."

He knew. Dinn was serious, like an idiot. He didn't protect this city just because of his feeling for a certain someone.

"Then why are you stopping me?"

"His method is wrong."

Yes, because of that, Dinn was gradually twisted. There really wasn't such a thought to protect the city because of the city, and to protect the city for the people living in it. Dinn only used it as his own belief and pushed himself harder because of it. He became twisted because of that.

"Why do you think it's wrong? How can you say it's wrong to increase his own power for the sake of that thought?" Dalshena retorted bitterly. Sharnid's face twisted. Dinn can't be wrong..... Her words were like that of a religious zealot, and they shook Sharnid's position.

Sharnid hesitated and stopped his movement. Dalshena swung her lance at him. He would have fainted from the impact of that attack if he didn't manage to defend with his guns. Sliding away from the ground, he continued to shoot at her.

".....If he's not wrong, then why didn't you say something about the use of illegal drugs?" he said, managing to stand up. " Why didn't you use the drugs?"

Dalshena's expression changed again. "......Shut up."

"Why didn't you tell me about them? If you don't feel guilty, then why do you keep silent?"

"Shut up!"

Her lance pierced the ground. Right now, she could have defeated Sharnid and joined up with Dinn, but she suddenly stabbed the ground with the lance. Sharnid didn't understand her actions, but the atmosphere shut him up.

(That's good.)

He couldn't do anything to prevent her from meeting up with Dinn. He can only leave her to Layfon. All these thoughts flashed past him behind his expressionless face.

No. It can't turn out like that. It must not turn out like that. This is an ending Dinn must accept. It's got nothing to do with Dalshena. Dinn would have wanted it that way too.

Dinn probably didn't realize that he had unconsciously prevented Dalshena from participating in the illegal affairs.

"He didn't tell you because he feels guilty. That must be it?"

"".....I said, shut up," Dalshena said quietly, tightening her grip on the lance. The surface of the lance cracked apart, revealing the blade of a sword.

"Hey, hey....."

And she snatched it out before Sharnid had a good look at it. A thinner blade exuding elegance appeared in her hand.

"You think you're the only one hiding your real strength?" she raised the sword and charged.

"Your mission is to silence the enemy Psychokinesist."

She recalled Nina's words before the match. It'd be troublesome if the 10th platoon found out their plan. The 17th platoon confused the enemies' vision with the screen of dust and sand, cutting off the Psychokinesist from the battle and destroying the enemy team's communication network, completely isolating them one by one. The sand and dust were gathered to cover the audience's eyes, but it also did well to confuse the 10th platoon.

Naruki ran after Layfon.

(So fast!)

A distance quickly pulled open between Layfon and her. Tension spread out like a growing seed. Her movement didn't flow as well as usual, but it had reached at least about 80% of her usual self. Except it wasn't enough to match Layfon's speed.

(What amazing speed.....)

In this split second, she felt the burning agony of the difference of strength between them. Layfon was very strong.....exceeding any student here. She knew from the matches he had participated

in till now and also from the work he did with the City Police. She knew, but what she knew was totally turned over by what she saw now. Her previous understanding was just an innocent feeling of a first year Military Arts student. In another way, Naruki might have been cheated till now.

(Damn.)

She wasn't as confident with External Type Kei, but internal Kei was different. She had always thought that it wasn't that difficult to fight with platoon members. She increased her speed.

The members of the 10th platoon did not attack, as expected. Nina was confident in the effectiveness of Layfon's suppression of the 10th platoon, but Naruki held her suspicions. She didn't stop to help Layfon even though she felt uneasy about him fighting so many people alone. No matter how powerful he was, he was still alone. Nina's conclusion was clear-cut. She seemed to know more of Layfon's real strength than Naruki. The Layfon with Naruki and the Layfon with Nina and her team.....Who was the real Layfon? That was the question hovering in Naruki's mind.

He was probably Layfon on both sides. Anyone would seem different in different situations. It wasn't manipulation, but rather the expression of oneself according to what suited the situation best. Naruki had the same experience when she was with Meishen and Mifi, and when she was working with the City Police. But looking at the other side of someone she knew was new and surprising.

(She probably can't trust him at this level.)

Naruki thought of Meishen. Meishen wasn't a Military Artist. She didn't have to consider trusting her comrade's ability during a fight. Meishen was gentle and kind. She cried when Naruki returned at the time of filth monsters assaulting Zuellni. But it should be all right since this was a platoon match. Nobody's life was threatened. However, if the same life-threatening situation occurred and Layfon had to face danger alone, could Meishen be all right like now?

(I think not.)

Would that difference happen.....Naruki didn't know now. She hoped the difference wouldn't be too great. The importance was that Naruki's childhood friend was interested in someone in Zuellni for the first time, and that someone was of the opposite gender. This was probably what first love was like. Naruki wanted it to be all smooth between Meishen and Layfon.....But Meishen wasn't the only person interested in him.

(Geez.....)

She hadn't the time to think of it now. Having run through half of the war field, the camp of the 10th platoon entered her vision. No dust and sand covered this area. The sound of the audience suddenly rose, and the excited voice of the commentator drifted into Naruki's ear. Everyone's gaze gathered on the dust-stained Naruki.

"Uh, Uh!" Naruki raised her gaze. She was looking for the enemy Psychokinesist. The 10th platoon did make changes to their site, but because it wasn't entirely necessary, the changes were

only minimal. Having spotted the Psychokinesist behind the screen of soil, Naruki rushed over to him.

A Psychokinesist's observation of enemy movement was keener than a Military Artist, so he was able to stay behind and feed updated information to his team members who fought at high speed. The Psychokinesist of the 10th platoon quickly noticed Naruki was near, but his fighting ability was about the same as an average normal person. The problem now was what sort of defense had the Psychokinesist made in the time when he noticed Naruki was around?

"You have a few flakes ahead of you. Please watch out," Felli's voice came lightly to Naruki. Naruki changed tact and ran in a zigzag fashion. The air exploded behind her and on her sides. Flashes beamed everywhere. Rumbles filled her eardrums and purple lightning flashed before her. A Psychokinetic storm. This was about the only attack mode of a Psychokinesist. The flakes followed Naruki, matching her speed and exploding accordingly.

Naruki's eardrums and balance still worked. She had stuffed her ears and she ran through the gaps in between explosions, eyes half closed.

She opened her eyes, confirmed the location of the Psychokinesist and threw over the Dite in her hand.

It was something that Harley made – a rope. It wasn't a real rope. It was a chain made of black alloy. The small chains chained

together and made them look like a rope. It landed on the Psychokinesist and wrapped itself around him. Naruki went over and struck him once. The Psychokinesist fainted.

"Wa....."

The audience cheered. Naruki breathed a sign of relief and looked back on the dust filled field.

(Layfon, what're you planning?)

Layfon had yet to hold a Dite. Grains of sand hit his skin as he moved. Despite the lowered visibility due to the sand in his eyes, he managed to block the four enemy team members. Dinn was giving orders from behind his teammates and with delicate timing, assaulted Layfon with the rope in his hand. The rope waited for Layfon until he had avoided the attacks of the four enemies. It felt as if a Psychokinesist had set a trap.

But Layfon remained unhurt. He observed the flow of Kei with his eyelids half closed. One glance told him the unusual flow of Kei was caused by the use of the illegal drugs. What was strange was Dinn's lack of control. He was controlling his External and Internal Kei, but he failed to stop the excess Kei from spilling out

of his body. This was proof of his inability to control his Kei vein as he wanted. Zuellni's level hadn't gone so low as to pick that level of Military Artist for a platoon.

(He's already wounded.) Layfon thought so. Dinn must be tired, a consequence of using the drugs. This was the same as when Nina fainted from exhausting her internal Kei. Dinn could still use his Kei since his reaction wasn't as serious as Nina's, but the unusual symptoms were there and they would eventually turn into something very serious.

(If it's not stopped.....) Layfon thought and counter-attacked. He changed the rhythm of following the defense against the 10th platoon's continuous advance. Dinn and his four team members also changed their rhythm accordingly, and their formation collapsed.

Layfon seized that chance. He struck down all four enemy members in that one moment.

"What?" Dinn looked at his fallen subordinates. "Just who are you?"

Dinn didn't know what Layfon did, but simultaneously striking down all four people wasn't something that a normal student in Military Arts could do. This fact made Dinn understand how unusually powerful Layfon was.

"Your end is here," Layfon burst out what Sharnid had said. He didn't plan to threaten Dinn, but he couldn't think of any other suitable words. He pulled out his Dite, let his Kei run into it and restored it.

The Shim Adamantium Dite.

"I don't have any other choice."

This thought helped him forgive himself for holding a Katana. He found himself very unsightly, but he was the one who made this choice. He didn't choose to face this situation when he agreed to become Nina's strength. It was the same as when he was in Grendan. It wasn't for the sake of that ending that he abused the position of a Heaven's Blade successor. Since he had made such a choice, all that remained was the question of how to resolve it. Layfon chose to stay with the 17th platoon. But in the 17th platoon were Sharnid, Felli and Harley, and now it also had Naruki. Things associated with them were all entangled.

This time, it had to do with Sharnid.

In this case, Layfon couldn't give himself an answer to the solemn question he raised. He could only answer with a Katana even though it felt like he was betraying himself a second time.

The first betrayal was when he wielded the Heaven's Blade and did not choose the form of a Katana. That was the equivalent of rejecting the Psyharden skills that Derek had taught him when he was small. Once he became a Heaven's Blade successor, he decided

to do anything to earn money. The him back then could not use the skills taught by his adopted father because that would taint his name. And now, Layfon had broken the vow he made.

Pain swam in his chest. His arm felt the weight of the Katana. The settings on the Katana revealed Harley's exceptional skill. Not only that. The feeling of being exiled was gone. Calmness descended on Layfon. This was matter of fact. The feeling he had at present was the basics of Psyharden's skill. Everything had come back to him. He was calm.

Layfon frowned to prevent himself from sinking in that nostalgic and natural feeling. He knew that feeling would leave him quickly.

"Here I go," Layfon said.

"Ugh, Oooooh!" Dinn roared in response.

The rope attacked as Layfon started running. The rope went through Layfon as if he were not there.

That was Layfon's afterimage. He had increased his speed in the second when the rope was about to hit him. This was a variation of internal type Kei – Fleeting shadow. His control of speed caused his opponent to misjudge distance. The afterimages helped to intensify that confusion. The illegal drugs had increased Dinn's Kei , but Dinn lacked the skill to use his extra Kei. While the rope struck out, Layfon had slipped past the weapon to stand right in front of Dinn.

(And I'm affecting this consequence. What a bad feeling.)

External type variation – Houshintotsu.

Layfon's Katana swung down. The Kei enveloping the blade trembled as if to cut through water. It poured onto Dinn. The Kei jumped in a route that differed from the Katana's, and it formed needles to stab Dinn's body.

"Gah.....Ah....."

Dinn moaned and knelt down. The rope fell onto the ground. Layfon understood Dinn's feelings as he had gone through the same experience when Derek taught him that move. The pain wasn't intense but what he felt was the exhaustion of having all of his strength being sucked away. Layfon had blocked the flow of Kei in Dinn's limbs. As long as Dinn was like this for a few minutes, his Kei wouldn't flow well for half a year.

Now Layfon just needed to keep Dinn in this situation for a few more minutes. He looked around to see the sand and dust still covering half of the field. The flow of Kei in the air prevented the sand from settling. Sharnid and Naruki seemed to have finished their respective battles. The sand would probably settle down by the time Layfon released his Kei.

"Ugh, Uuuuu."

"I hope you don't force yourself," Layfon said to Dinn, who was trying to stand up.

"If you force yourself too much, you'll damage your Kei vein."

The effect of the illegal drugs still stayed with Dinn's Kei vein. Forcing Kei to work in this situation was like pouring water continuously into a waterway that was dammed. In the end, both dam and waterway would be destroyed.

Dinn forced himself to move a little. His face was all red. "You won't understand the feeling of wanting to do something even though your own ability isn't enough. You won't understand that feeling."

Layfon frowned. "......Even my life wasn't all smooth sailing. I'm here because I failed."

"......"

"Being strong can't solve everything. I failed because I couldn't solve everything. You haven't solved your problem either, and you chose the worst choice. In that case, this ending is the least objectionable."

"......Who made this decision?"

"Eh?"

"Who decided my ending? Sharnid? Nina Antalk? The Student President? I won't let anyone decide my ending. I'm not that weak. ....."

Feeling the disturbance in the air, Layfon raised his Katana. The air flow was stirring. Was Dinn pouring new strength into his Kei

vein? No.....Kei was spilling from his Kei vein, but it shouldn't be enough to speed up the flow of the air.

As if a whirl appeared in the air.....

Layfon remembered something about this unpleasant pressure.

"I'm doing this for the city. You, who doesn't understand the natural mission of a Military Artist....." He continued to murmur as Kei flowed to his limbs.

"How can you stop me!" he shouted.

At Dinn's shout, Layfon felt the Kei needles in Dinn's body shatter.

"Could it be..."

Standing behind Dinn was a golden goat.

Chapter 6: The insane guardian

I planned to refuse them, so how did it turn out like this? Felli asked herself this question again and again.

She had met Haia when she left the Training Complex. Karian had showed up as well. She had planned to refuse Karian's request but her brother had talked her into helping Haia. Why? Felli would have looked terrible if she were asked that question, especially if Layfon asked it. But whether changes would come to her face would be another matter. However, Layfon didn't ask her. The relationship between Layfon and Haia was tense, ready to explode any moment. Layfon looked like he had something to say but couldn't say it. He probably didn't have the time to worry about Felli. Perhaps he couldn't do anything about it.

Yeah, but she was still a little bit angry.

What was Layfon worried about? She could tell just by looking at the way he fought, holding the Katana. His problem probably had nothing to do with Sharnid's entanglement with the 10th platoon. It had everything to do with the fact that he had to resolve this matter through his holding a Katana. Just what does he think about the Katana?

Layfon was a complicated person. His personality seemed simple and naive, but he carried a complicated past. In his past as a Heaven's Blade successor he had many different problems. Was she asking for too much, hoping for him to notice her more? But, she still wanted him to look at her. Only him. She wanted him to understand her as herself, not as a Psychokinesist, and she wanted

to understand him at the same time. Her brother, Karian, had no interest in her other than her ability in Psychokinesis.

(Yes, because it's related to Layfon.....)

So she agreed to help Haia. It wasn't because Haia was also from Grendan.

"That thing will bring misfortune to the strong."

Haia had explained to her about the thing she discovered, the thing that Layfon met with in the ruined city, clarifying for her what a Haikizoku was. He was clearly hiding something else, but Felli wasn't interested in what he didn't say. To her, "the strong" meant Layfon. No, anyone who knew Layfon would think like that , so she hoped for Haia to suppress the Haikizoku. If Haia planned to take it with him to Grendan, then take it, even though his decision didn't hold any consideration towards Zuellni. Felli didn't care about Karian's calculations either.

All Felli needed to do was contact Haia when she sensed the Haikizoku. She didn't know where she'd find it, but the Haikizoku was sensitive to the atmosphere of a fight. Haia said something about a racket during the platoon match. But who would have thought.....

The match had ended. Nina didn't move an inch. Naruki had disabled the enemy Psychokinesist and Layfon had defeated the enemy captain. Sharnid and Dalshena were still fighting in a back and forth situation, but since Dinn had fallen, it was meaningless

to continue the fight. The normal fight had already ended. The illegal drug scandal surrounding the 10th platoon would fade with Dinn's departure, and the 10th platoon would be disbanded.

"Can it be....."

Confusion shrouded Felli when the flakes conveyed to her an impossible reaction around Dinn. Confused, she reflexively sent out a signal to the flake beside Haia. She didn't do it consciously. At times when the Psychokinesist was filtering vast amounts of information, she'd act reflexively without her knowledge. For her to have done that, Layfon would.....While thinking of that, she felt the reaction closing in on Layfon. It felt as if that reaction had fused with Dinn.

In that split second, sparks flew in Felli's head. After managing the information at extreme high speed, Felli made this conclusion. Haia really didn't say everything. "To bring misfortune to the strong" wasn't the entirety of the phrase. And by "strong", he didn't mean Military Arts skills..... He meant one's will of concentration. The will. Wasn't that a person's strongest thing? In that case, Layfon didn't have it. He could maintain absolute calm before filth monsters, but in today's match, he hadn't shown a clear direction in his action. It felt as if he didn't know why he was fighting today. Haia had said the Haikizoku would bring misfortune to Layfon – Felli didn't know in what form yet – or it was more accurate to say Haia himself also didn't know whether the Haikizoku would bring misfortune to Layfon or not?

Could it be..... That Haia was using this match as an experiment ?

Haia infiltrated Zuellni through the illegal drug organization. Of course he knew Military Artists were taking advantage of the illegal trade. He might have known that Dinn was the one taking illegal drugs. Since this city belonged to the Academy City Alliance, people would do all they could to cover up the scandal. The City would need the strength comparable to a Military Artist who had taken drugs in order to cover up the scandal. Since Haia already knew Layfon was in Zuellni, it was possible that he did this deliberately to make Layfon enter the fray. To force Layfon to answer Karian's question, Haia had deliberately mentioned the Psyharden technique.

"You deceived us," Felli burst out, her words sent to Haia through her flakes.

Haia laughed. "I didn't plan to. I just created a situation for it to make itself known," he dragged out his words. "Well then, as promised, I've got to go."

Felli sensed numerous reactions from the war field as Haia finished his words.

He never thought it'd appear at this moment. Someday, he'd have to confront this mysterious existence. That was the feeling Layfon

had when he understood Haia's goal, but the Haikizoku had come just too quickly.

It had done something to Dinn.

".....What're you planning?"

Layfon stepped back from Dinn when the Houshintotsu was shattered. A huge amount of power surrounded Dinn and as Layfon had thought, this didn't come from the use of drugs..... Drugs could not increase the strength of a Kei vein like this. Obviously, it was the Haikizoku. Usually, a phenomenon of this sort would have paralyzed its owner, but Dinn's face became livelier than before.

The goat didn't answer Layfon. Its indifferent attitude felt the same as last time's, but the feeling was somewhat different. Strange.

(Haikizoku.....That's your name.)

Layfon recalled what Haia had called it, but he himself didn't know this name. Haia said he'd take it back to Grendan. His promise to guard Zuellni as repayment meant the Haikizoku had enough value to make Haia make this trade. Layfon didn't understand it.

"Just what're you planning?" he asked again.

"....."

"!"

The goat remained silent. The one who moved was Dinn. The rope flew from the ground to strike Layfon. Layfon reacted despite the surprise attack. He'd have been in danger had Dinn attacked him by moving his fingers and wrist. That was how he made his moves before. But it was different this time. The Kei running through the rope controlled the weapon like muscles making complex moves. It was the same as Layfon's steel thread technique. That was why Layfon managed to react in time. Chills ran down his spine. Dinn's move obviously exceeded all the moves he had made before. There was no reason behind it. Dinn couldn't have been hiding his true strength or else he wouldn't resort to using illegal drugs.

"Layfon.....What's going on?" It was Naruki.

At her voice, Layfon changed his direction as he avoided the rope, and headed for Naruki.

"!"

The rope brushed past his face and tore through his skin. Disregarding the injury, he swept Naruki up with one arm, blocked the rope with the Katana and retreated.

"Wh, What are you....."

The suddenness of everything broke Naruki's composure, but she held her breath when she noticed the blood on his face.

"I'm not sure either....."

"".....What's that thing?"

Naruki noticed the goat too. At least this denied Felli's worry about the thing being an illusion.

(As I thought, it's the Haikizoku.)

What Haia said, the twisted Electronic Fairy of the city.

(So it's done something to Dinn.)

That goat must have done it. Huge horns extended from the goat's head. With eyes that looked like a human's, it stood behind Dinn.

(Is it controlling Dinn?)

Layfon put Naruki down. He defended against the rope as he observed Dinn and the goat. The huge amount of Kei spilling out from Dinn ran on the ground. Dinn was full of energy but no feelings showed in his eyes. His eyes were like the goat's. Obviously, the goat was manipulating him.

(Then.....)

Layfon decided to chop through the goat. The pressure on him back in the ruined city when he met the goat there wasn't with him today. He should be able to do it. Why? Was it because of the Katana? He planned to neither save Dinn nor kill him.

(Here I go.)

As he was about to move –

"That's my prey~"

The voice with words that dragged stopped Layfon's movement . Layfon sensed a presence at the time when he heard the voice. That person must have used Sakkei to mask his presence and moved close to Layfon under the cover of sand and dust.

"Haia!"

"The Haikizoku is ours. That's our promise~"

Numerous chains flew out as Dinn escaped into the sky. Haia leaped out of the cloud of sand and forced Dinn back to the ground. The chains bound Dinn tightly the moment he landed. The goat remained the same.

"What's going on?"

Layfon watched Haia and the people around him. Men he had not seen before held the chains that bound Dinn. They must be members of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang, Haia's subordinates. When did they infiltrate the war field.....

No, they didn't have to infiltrate the field. Karian must have given them permission to use the dormitories. It wasn't difficult for experienced Military Artists to head over to the war field from the dormitories.

"What's going on? We're just capturing the Haikizoku."

"But isn't the Haikizoku that thing over there?" Layfon looked at the goat. The goat didn't move in the face of Haia and his subordinates.

"Even I can't capture that thing. No, even you, a Heaven's Blade successor can't do it either. Our dear Queen is the same."

"What do you mean?"

"But it's different with the host. Once we capture the host, the Haikizoku can only wait and let us take it. It's the same when the Haikizoku couldn't do anything to the filth monsters that attacked the city."

"......What's he saying?" Naruki asked. Layfon didn't know how to answer.

Haia didn't look at her. He continued, "It's fortunate that the Haikizoku came to the Academy City. In here are people with ideals but never enough strength to make them come true. They have the Haikizoku but they don't know how to use it. By itself, the Haikizoku would never have come to us."

"What are you going to do with him at Grendan?"

"This is unrelated to Layfon-kun. You can't even return to Grendan," he laughed smugly. Instead of blood rushing to his face like the time when he saw Haia in the conference room, Layfon kept his cool and waited for Haia to continue. This must be the feeling given to him by the Katana, but Layfon didn't know what to do.

"Never mind, I'll give you a hint. Why do you think Grendan's always in the danger zone? The answer is the same as that thing there."

"Why.....?"

Grendan was always in the danger zone. Layfon already knew that fact. It was a natural fact to him who was born in Grendan. The existence of Heaven's Blade successors came from the need to survive in such an unusual place. That was natural. Layfon didn't find it strange before he arrived at Zuellni.

(The reason behind Grendan's survival there?)

He had never thought of it.

"Well then, we're taking it," Haia ended the conversation himself. Layfon didn't move.

Haia had said to Karian that he'd capture the Haikizoku and transport it back to Grendan. It was unclear whether Karian knew how Haia was planning to do that. So he planned to transport Dinn along with the Haikizoku. Did he obtain Karian's permission beforehand..... Layfon had no idea. If he had known, he could use this reason to counter-attack and prevent Haia from taking Dinn.

A presence came up behind the inert Layfon.

"Wait a minute," Nina called. "You can't take Dinn Dee."

"I won't listen to you. You're just a student."

"You guys.....What will you do to Dinn after taking him to Grendan?"

"Say more," Haia smiled mockingly.

"Dinn did do something wrong, but it won't change the fact that we're classmates. I won't allow his fate to be handed over to you."

Looking at Dinn who was bound by chains, Nina didn't think Haia and the Mercenary Gang would take care of him through normal means. She raised her iron whips. "Let go of Dinn Dee."

"".....An immature girl who is all talk. What a headache."

Haia was about the same age as Layfon and Nina, but his attitude sounded like an old uncle's.

"What if I don't let him go? Wanna fight? Fight with the real Military Artists here? We've 43 people in the dorm. Do you want to make an enemy of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang?"

The organization had fought numerous times with filth monsters and other Military Artists. Their number was way smaller than the population in Zuellni, but the difference in their skill was huge. What was more important was that the Military Artists in Zuellni weren't mentally prepared. A sudden attack would quickly put them at a disadvantage. This was the same for any Military Artist. And the students in the Military Arts course here lacked real fighting experience. They had no means of resisting the experienced mercenaries. Haia and his Gang just needed to leave Zuellni amidst the chaos. They had their own roaming bus and could leave anytime. Self-confidence in being unbeatable showed on Haia's face.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Layfon said, putting the Dite back into the weapon harness.

"Did you say something? Former Heaven's Blade successor."

Layfon kept silent. Nina was beside him. Since Nina had declared her position, he had also made his decision.

"I'll be your opponent, against all 43 members of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang. That number should be enough to test my skill," he said, having chosen the words that suited a Heaven Blade's successor.

He didn't feel that relaxed in reality. Besides, fighting all 43 people would put him in a difficult fight.

"Allow me to see the weak skill nurtured outside Grendan."

Haia was still relaxed, but the people around him were different . They didn't utter a word, yet the entire atmosphere had changed.

"Layton....." Naruki swallowed. Nina's body had turned stiff. Hostility flooded at them.

(We've made them angry.)

This way, Layfon had reduced the possibility of getting Nina and Naruki involved.

(I'll reduce that possibility more.....)

He pulled out a Dite. Not the Shim Adamantium Dite but the Sapphire Dite. The Dite that Haia had broken into pieces two days ago. It had returned to its exact form before it broke. Its feeling in his hand hadn't changed, but it felt just a tiny bit different as he was previously holding a Katana. It seemed as if his own arm had twisted. Necessary though. This was the other reason that turned him back to the Heaven's Blade successor.

The smiled disappeared from Haia's face as expected.

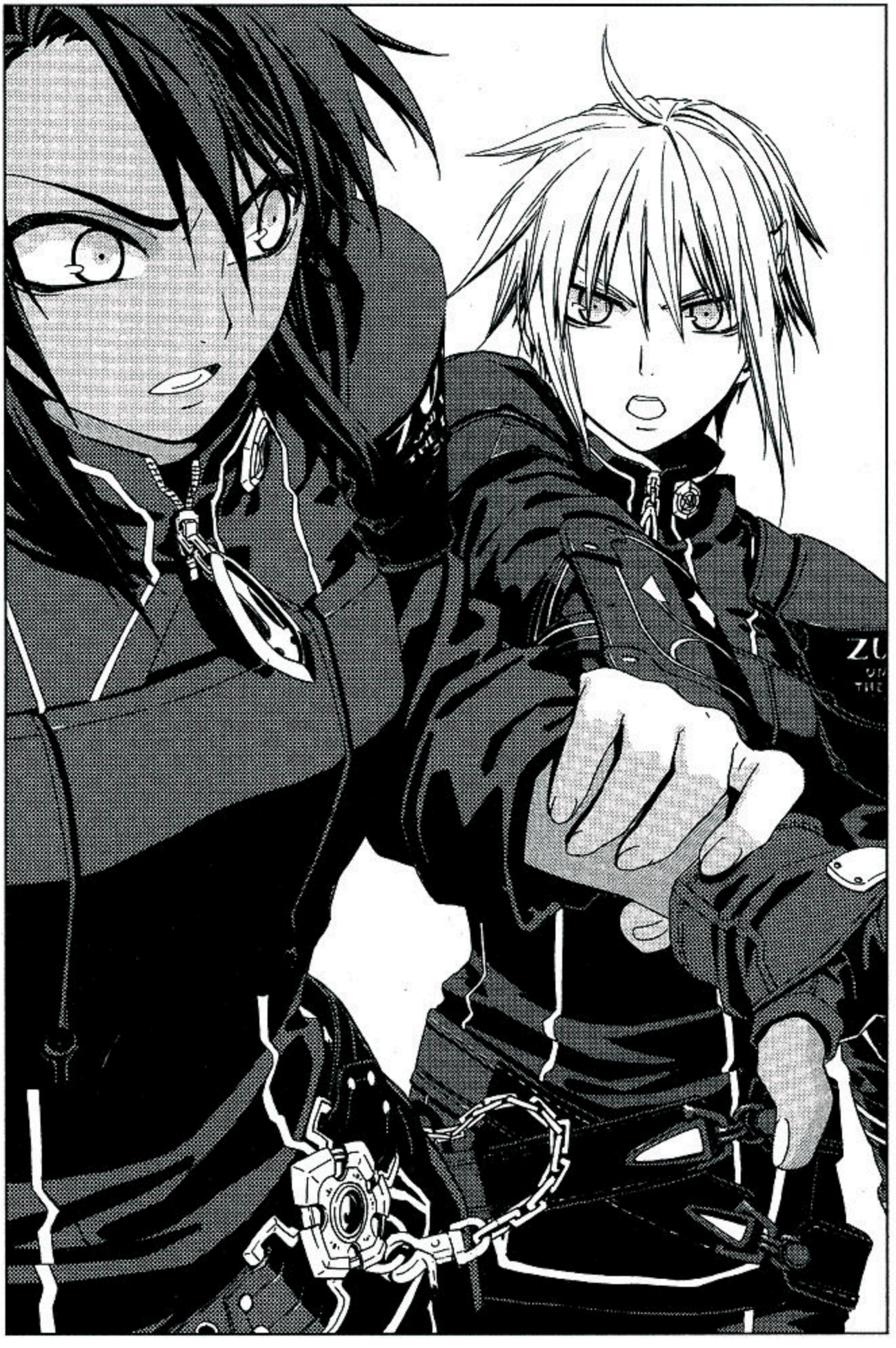
"You're very good at making light of others~" Haia said, provoked by Layfon facing him with a sword.

At his young age, Haia was already the leader of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang. His situation was kind of similar to Layfon's when Layfon became a Heaven's Blade successor at age 10. Standing in a position that didn't match his age, of course he had to fight against this insult and show his true strength. Otherwise his outrage wouldn't settle down. This was the arrogance of someone standing on a high place. He couldn't put Layfon's insult aside.

Layfon predicted Haia's reaction because he was once in the same situation. When he fought against the three senpai in the Military Arts course, he had retained a bad habit from Grendan. That habit was still here. He thought Haia was the same, and he had guessed right.

"Fine. If I defeat you here, maybe I'll get the Heaven's Blade when I return to Grendan." Haia pulled out his Dite and restored it into its Katana form.

"Stop it, Layton," Naruki groaned. "The Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang is an organization made of strong Military Artists . Stop it, you're too reckless." She thought Layfon would die.



Ignoring Naruki, Layfon stepped closer and closer to Haia. The tip of the Sapphire Dite touched the ground as if he was writing on the dirt.

"Come."

Haia raised his Katana to above his shoulder.

"Layton....."

Nina grabbed Naruki's wrist and stopped her from stopping him.

"Leave it to Layfon."

"What did you say!?" Naruki's face had gone red with outrage.

"If it's Layfon, he'll be okay," Nina said.

"Layfon might be very strong, but he's up against the entire Mercenary Gang. How could he win?"

Naruki hadn't seen the strength of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang, but this organization had drifted between cities, gathering the best fighters from numerous battles. It wasn't something that a student Military Artist could fight against.

"It's okay. Believe in Layfon."

Layfon was Grendan's Heaven's Blade successor.....Naruki probably wouldn't understand even if Nina told her that title. The

name "Heaven's Blade successor" was rarely heard outside of Grendan. Any city would give a title to its best Military Artist. Heaven's Blade successor was just one of those titles. Compared to that title, the name of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang made Naruki more worried. All Nina could do was stop Naruki from interfering, and wait for the result.

(But.....)

This probably wouldn't stop the fight. Layfon was only buying them time. He had delicately provoked Haia and stopped the Gang's members from taking Dinn. Nina's current mission was to think of a way to save Dinn during this time.

(What should I do?)

The Gang's concentration was on Haia and Layfon, but their concentration on guarding Dinn hadn't slipped. Dinn couldn't move and the chains around him showed no signs of loosening.

The golden beast stood behind Dinn.

(That's the Haikizoku.)

The creature that Layfon witnessed in the ruined city, a creature of mystery. Haia and his organization appeared because of it. What did they plan to do after taking it back to Grendan.....Nina didn't know. They just needed to capture it and take it away, which was fine with Nina if not for Dinn.

"Felli," she said softly to the flake.

"What?"

"Did you contact the Student President?"

"I'll try."

Karian was the one who made the deal with Haia.

"Got it."

"I understand the situation," Karian's voice came through the flake.

"Did you predict the outcome?"

"He was unusually reluctant to provide information on the Haikizoku. He didn't reveal how he was going to capture it."

(How arrogant.)

Anger shot through Nina. She didn't make a noise. She must not attract the Gang's attention.

"I finally understand what they're planning," Karian said. "To cause a ruckus in an Academy City. It appears the Haikizoku has the value to make the Academy City Alliance an enemy of the Mercenary Gang. But I've also reserved a move. I said they could take it but I did not permit them taking Dinn."

"Then what do we do?"

This was the most urgent issue.

"The problem is Dinn. If we can peel away the Haikizoku from him, then everything's perfectly solved."

"But to do that, we must first understand why it chose Dinn....."

"I know why," Felli's light voice cut on.

"So what's going on?"

"Haia said it himself - In here are people with ideals but never enough strength to make them come true."

Haia said that when he was capturing Dinn.

"The core of a Haikizoku is something to do with the mind, right? Because it's a mad Electronic Fairy of a city, it must have wanted to protect the city."

"So it takes over Dinn.....In order to protect the city?"

But then, why did it choose this timing to pick Dinn? Why Dinn ?

"That might be because of Dinn being pushed to his limit? When defeated by Layfon, Dinn revealed his sense of mission to protect the city. He had the mission but his feeling for it could have intensified at that moment," Karian said in response to Felli's opinion.

"The Electronic Fairy of a city destroyed by filth monsters.....I can understand how it might feel the same as Dinn."

"But isn't it impossible to take the Haikizoku away from Dinn right now?" Nina didn't think she lost to Dinn in terms of her sense of mission. But the fact of Dinn losing had connected him with the Haikizoku, and Nina had no way of putting herself in between them.

"In that case, we can only destroy his heart," Karian said coldly. "Since it's his stubborn heart of protecting the city that caused the Haikizoku to choose him, then we just need to remove his sense of conviction. In other words, make him let go of his mission."

"But how....."

"Can you leave it to me?" a new voice cut in.

"Sharnid?"

Sharnid and Dalshena were closing on Nina's location, being very cautious not to attract the Mercenary Gang's attention. Sharnid's voice came through the flake.

"Do you have a way?"

"You never know if we don't try." Sharnid shrugged. He was wounded.

Dust covered Dalshena's clothes but she didn't look injured. It seemed she had won the battle. She looked at Dinn. Dinn remained conscious but he hadn't done anything to resist the

chains. Looking at the side of Dalshena's face, Nina felt a shock in her chest. Eyes like a mirror, exuding unbelievable light. Dinn was staring at the ground. Pain filled Dalshena's face.

"Can you do it?"

What they had to do was to completely uproot Dinn's purpose. This was the same as taking away his life for someone who looked at his mission as important as his own life. For these two people who truly knew Dinn, could they do it?

"We have to try, right?" Sharnid's bitter smile showed a bottomless hole.

Nina was also looking at Dalshena.

"I'll do it," Dalshena replied curtly.

Layfon and Haia watched each other, their bodies still. Ten steps separated them. Internal Kei could have helped them close that distance in an instant, but the two of them were still as statues.

One move would decide the outcome of the battle. Layfon planned it that way and Haia responded the same. If the present Layfon were dragged into a long fight, even if Layfon's skill was

worse than Haia's, Layfon wouldn't have received too much damage. Haia was unable to accept that and responded by going with Layfon's decision.

The air seemed to have frozen between the two.

This feeling of pressure was essential to Layfon, both to buy time and to scare the members of the Mercenary Gang around him. Usual, high-speed fights between Military Artists were very intense. On the other hand, this fight allowed the observers to breathe. Layfon must buy some time for Nina and the others to find a way to save Dinn. And by entering this state, Haia had done exactly what he wanted.

(Next.....)

Is to win.

The morale of the Mercenary Gang would rise if Layfon lost, and Dinn would be taken away. Besides, Layfon wanted to win. To win against a certain someone. This feeling had never once appeared to him when he fought countless matches as a Heaven's Blade successor. He just wanted to win, simply win against his opponent.

(Is this hatred?)

Layfon calmly analysed his own feeling. Haia had a bad character. He had thorns wrapped in his words.

".....Why did you hide your Katana?" Haia said as if he didn't care.

A battle without words.

The tip of Layfon's sword hung loosely down. He changed his fighting stance as he read the Kei flow of Haia's attack by looking at the change in his opponent's muscles. Haia changed his own attack path in response to the change that Layfon made. This cycle continued. And Haia asked a question as they read each other's attack path. The fact that Layfon could use the Psyharden technique without a hitch made him a thorn in Haia's eyes. Haia felt bitter at how Layfon could execute a move that he himself found difficult. That experience made him provoke Layfon with the name of Psyharden.

"The Katana is your true strength. Why did you give it up?"

"It's a repayment."

Layfon recalled the time when the technician asked him what form he wanted the Heaven's Blade to take. The technician had asked him "why?" too. Layfon had kept his silence during that time, but it was different this time.

"I've already betrayed them but I still don't want to lose anything. Do you find it strange?"

What Layfon planned to do back then was the same as betrayal in the eyes of his adopted father. Even Layfon, raised by such an

adopted father, thought what he was about to do was dirty. But without any way out, he still chose to enter the underground matches. It wasn't a problem of good versus evil. There was the difference between Layfon and his adapted father, so he thought he had betrayed him.

"You're a naive-thinking moron."

Haia cared nothing for Layfon's words.

"How can you not use your best technique in a battle? You only say that because you look down on your opponent."

Layfon didn't think so. He shook his head. "I'm doing this out of my own decision. This is what conviction is like."

Dinn raised his head. He was resolved to protect the city, but because of his lack of power, he took the illegal drug. He was the same as Haia on a certain level. But Dinn didn't allow Dalshena to touch the drugs even though the 10th platoon would have become more powerful. He was at an impasse. Still, he had made his decision, and it was a decision made naturally in his consciousness .

"People who fight without a purpose will never understand," Layfon said.

"......Yeah right," Haia replied and didn't say anything else.

Layfon tossed away other thoughts to concentrate on the sword. The two of them imagined the battle in the air that seemed to have

frozen. Once they moved, that was the time when the outcome would be decided in one split second.

Layfon remained with the disadvantage, but he couldn't allow Haia to see the possibility of a victory. If he failed in that, he'd have trouble suppressing the Mercenary Gang's morale. The members of the Mercenary Gang had drifted from many cities, but most of them were born in Grendan. They understood the meaning behind the title of Heaven's Blade successor. It was natural for Layfon to win. If Haia won instead, then the advantage would be on Haia's team.

In truth, Haia wasn't an easy opponent. It was possible for Haia to become a Heaven's Blade successor. And who knew what the outcome would be when Layfon was using a sword?

He cautiously calculated all kinds of attacks and their results. Haia continued to change the responses of his Kei.

(Not that easy to find an opening.)

The chance appeared before him as the thought flashed past his mind. Two presences, rushing to Dinn. It was just one swift moment but Haia's gaze did flit over to Dinn's side.

As if to cut through the stir of the Mercenary Gang, Layfon moved out. Haia also moved, almost at the same time.

In terms of timing, this speed could make up for Haia's miss. But.....

When the two of them were close enough to feel each other's breath, they swung with their weapons. Haia's Katana swung down. Layfon's sword swung up. Sparks flashed as the two rushed past each other and exchanged their previous positions.

Layfon lowered his sword slowly. Blood spurted from the cut on his right cheek. Looking at his expression, the Mercenary Gang members kept completely still, whereas Haia groaned. "Damn....."

Layfon's sword was faster than Haia's Katana. The upward slash of the sword had changed the path of Haia's Katana, and the Katana shattered the moment when the two weapons clashed. External type Kei – Rot. Haia had used this move when he fought Layfon for the first time. The shattered pieces of the Katana had scattered everywhere, and one piece had brushed past Layfon's cheek.

Layfon's sword had destroyed the Katana to strike Haia. Haia had then toppled.

"Damn....."

He was still conscious. The safety setting on Layfon's sword was unlocked. He didn't really slash Haia, even so, he had broken several ribs and injured his opponent's internal organs.

Haia vomited blood and fainted. Layfon kept the rest of the Mercenary Gang members at bay with his aura.

Sharnid watched Dalshena's back. Her only purpose was to convey a message to Dinn. He thought Dinn's method was wrong. The captain recruited him into the 10th platoon to make his mission come true. He had inherited her feelings, Dalshena, who cried because she couldn't do anything to protect her beloved city. Sharnid didn't know when Dinn had added this burden of protecting Zuellni onto his own shoulders. Did Dalshena know? ....No. She probably didn't. She didn't even know how Dinn really felt. Just when did this start? At the time when Sharnid was still in the 10th platoon? Or after he left? Dinn was very reserved and traditional. Perhaps he took on Dalshena's thinking as his own without being conscious of it. He took it on to the extent that he'd allowed the Haikizoku to possess him. But the time had come for someone to stop him. Now that he had deviated from his path, someone must bring him back.

Moving at high speed, Sharnid suddenly sensed something cold at his back.

"Shena!" he called and leaped to a side. The spot he was in before exploded from Kei. The weapon was an arrow formed with Kei. Myunfa had shot that arrow but Sharnid didn't know of it.

Long distance attack. Where did it come from? He searched with his gaze. Dalshena had ignored the attack and kept running. Sharnid restored his Dite. Sniper rifle of Lithium alloy. Same as the past, Sharnid and Dinn were to eliminate anyone who sought to obstruct Dalshena's path.

He had grasped hold of the shooter's location after two more attacks. Information came now from Felli's flake. Internal Kei increased his vision, and he saw Myunfa preparing for her third shot. Myunfa didn't see him.

He stopped moving. The next target was.....

"Shena!" he pulled the trigger as he shouted.

Myunfa let loose her arrow at the same time.

"Ku....."

He heard a moaning voice. He stood up without confirming the result. He and Dinn had been protecting Dalshena till now. If Sharnid failed, then Dinn would take over. The reverse was true as well. But only Sharnid was guarding Dalshena's back at present.

".....Right."

He wouldn't make it. He'd put his own body onto the path of the shot. Sharnid was happy to get to guard Dalshena's back. He and Dinn used to eliminate anything unrelated to the flag, clearing the path for Dalshena. That was when Sharnid had confused his actions with love, confusing it with the oath. Both Sharnid and Dinn regarded Dalshena as the most important person to them. Sharnid couldn't even force out a laugh in the face of Dalshena, who was powerless against Dinn's unusual actions.

What would she do if she had evidence of Dinn's illegal dealing ? .....She had been investigating and Sharnid found it laughable

in how he tracked her every night because he was worried about her. Even though he no longer was part of the 10th platoon. But this was exactly why.....Same as Dinn refusing to let Dalshena touch the illegal drug, Sharnid's mission was to prevent her from suffering any more harm.

"I have to make it!" He shouted, running slower than he wished he could.

And someone suddenly appeared before him.

"Nina!"

Nina stood directly in the path of the arrow, blocking it from Dalshena. The Kei arrow hit Nina's chest and exploded. Sharnid swallowed.....And let out a breath.

Internal type Kei – Kongoukei.

The dust screen cleared to reveal Nina.

(That's right.)

Felli reported the defeat of Myunfa. Sharnid sat down on the ground and watched Dalshena's back, all strength leaving him. His work was done.

(I belong to a new place now.)

The 17th platoon..... was where Sharnid belonged. No matter what, he had chosen this new place himself.

(It's not the same as before anymore.)

The presence of the goat overwhelmed Dalshena. The way it stood with its huge horns and the long hair covering its body paralyzed her. It exuded an exotic sense of dignity. Dalshena would have knelt down before it if not for Dinn.

Dinn had become like this because of the goat. Dalshena stared at the Electronic Fairy as she half-knelt in front of Dinn.

"Dinn," she called. His pair of eyes, smooth as mirrors, showed no sign of comprehension. Dalshena swallowed. The Kei spilling from Dinn made her want to vomit. Something else was different. Illegal drugs? No, it wasn't.

"Dinn," she called again. He lifted his head to look at her, the only area of his body that he could move. His eyes remained emotionless, except he had reacted to her voice. Her voice.

"Dinn....."

She must convey this message. To save Dinn, and to end everything.

"Dinn.....We're finished."

Dinn didn't react to her words. His dry pupils reflected her image.

"We don't need to continue fighting anymore. There are people here stronger than us. There are people here who think the same as us. Leave it to them. We're not breaking our oath."

Memories surfaced in Dalshena's mind: the time when the three of them first met, the time when they stayed awake through the entire night to come up with strategies, the time when they entered the 10th platoon, the time when they won their first platoon match and had a fashion show. What happy times they were. She thought those times would continue forever.....

"You've done enough. It's all right now."

Dinn's lips trembled. Tears rolled down in his eyes.

"Dinn....." she called again. "I loved you."

The three of them fought for the city. The oath of that day had sealed Dalshena's feelings. The current Dinn's feelings, focused on the already graduated senpai, had broken that day's oath. Dalshena had stubbornly buried her feelings in the deepest corner of her heart when Sharnid left the platoon, and now, they were released.

"I loved you. And, goodbye," she said with trembling lips.

Tears fell from Dinn's eyes.

The goat behind Dinn disappeared.

Epilogue

Leerin and Derek came to the cemetery on Sunday, a week since their meeting with Almonise. They came to put the possession of the deceased in the grave.

Ryuhou Gadge. Emotionless, Leerin read the name engraved on the gravestone. She didn't know this person.

But even the heart of someone who didn't know the deceased could still stir. Leerin's heart stirred as she thought back to his life and the words of Queen Almonise: "Almost all those people who inherit the Psyharden technique are fated to leave the city."

Almonise said Layfon was the same.

Leerin wanted to deny her words. However the grave of Derek's brother from the same Military Arts lineage, who had died fighting on foreign soil, of Ryuhou Gadge, rejected that thought.

Leerin waited for Derek to finish his long prayer then left the cemetery with him. They walked without speaking, Derek being the solemn and silent type.

"Leerin."

His sudden voice surprised her. He turned around to look at her, holding in his hand a wooden box wrapped in a piece of cloth. He had been holding it all the time before they entered the cemetery. Leerin had thought that it belonged to Ryuhou Gadge.

Derek offered her the box. "Can you give this to Layfon for me?"

"Huh?"

The box weighed in Leerin's hand. It felt like a Dite. She wasn't a Military Artist so she wasn't in possession of a Dite, but she could tell it felt like one through her numerous contacts with Derek and Layfon. Both of them were Military Artists.

"I prepared this for Layfon. It's proof of his inheriting all of the Psyharden's skills," Derek said with a faraway gaze. "He was still very young when I finished teaching him everything. I could have given this to him back then, but I wanted to wait till he had grown older. In the end, I lost the chance to give it to him," he laughed mockingly.

Leerin thought it was because Layfon was exiled from Grendan, but she overturned that reaction. Derek could have given it to him when Layfon became a Heaven's Blade successor, but he didn't.

(Because Layfon held a sword.)

Leerin only realized this fact now, but she was able to realize it after spending a long period of time with Derek.

"He refuses to inherit Psyharden's techniques. I thought he'd have grown a little after becoming a Heaven's Blade successor.....It appeared I was wrong. He refused to inherit it because he thought he had betrayed me, and he needed to pay for his wrongdoing."

About the underground matches and what happened afterward .....Derek just met the person related to Layfon's past a few days ago, and meeting that person again had filled his heart with Layfon.

"He's sober and dull. I don't think he'll use the techniques I taught him even now. He needs forgiveness. He needs to forgive himself."

"Father....."

"You still contact him, don't you? Then you know where he is. Give it to him. Mail it or deliver it to him personally. It's all fine."

".....Huh?"

She could use these means to meet Layfon. Her face showed cheerfulness at this thought but she then shook her head. "I still have school."

It'd take at least half a year to reach Zuellni and return back to Grendan. If the location of Zuellni had changed, then the journey might take up to one to two years. She couldn't take a break from school for so long. Besides, it took money to leave Grendan.

"I can't use Layfon's money like that."

Derek put his hand on her head.

".....Father?"

"Both you and Layfon are like me. Too reserved. Don't sacrifice yourself because of that."

"But....."

"Even I wanted to leave the city with Ryuhou."

His words silenced her. "But my personality prevented me from leaving. At that time, my master was heavily injured from his fight with filth monsters, so someone had to inherit the name, and the candidates were Ryuhou and I. For a mature Military Artist to leave at that time would be willful. Ryuhou did it, but I couldn't."

He had suppressed his wish to do what he thought was right. Layfon was the same as Derek in this way, and Leerin too.

"I don't think I made the wrong choice back then. It's the highest honor for any Military Arts school to nurture talented people like Layfon. But even so....." Derek paused and caressed Leerin's head. "If I had left behind my reservations and sense of responsibility, followed my desire and left the city.....My wish to do that is still with me. I don't want you to have any regrets."

"Father....."

"Don't worry about the expenses. If you want to go, then go. It's not good for you to exhaust your heart waiting for him. To give up going and then confirm that you should have decided otherwise."

He touched the surface of the wooden box in Leerin's hand and left her like that. He didn't ask her to follow. He was giving her time to think on her own.

"Layfon....."

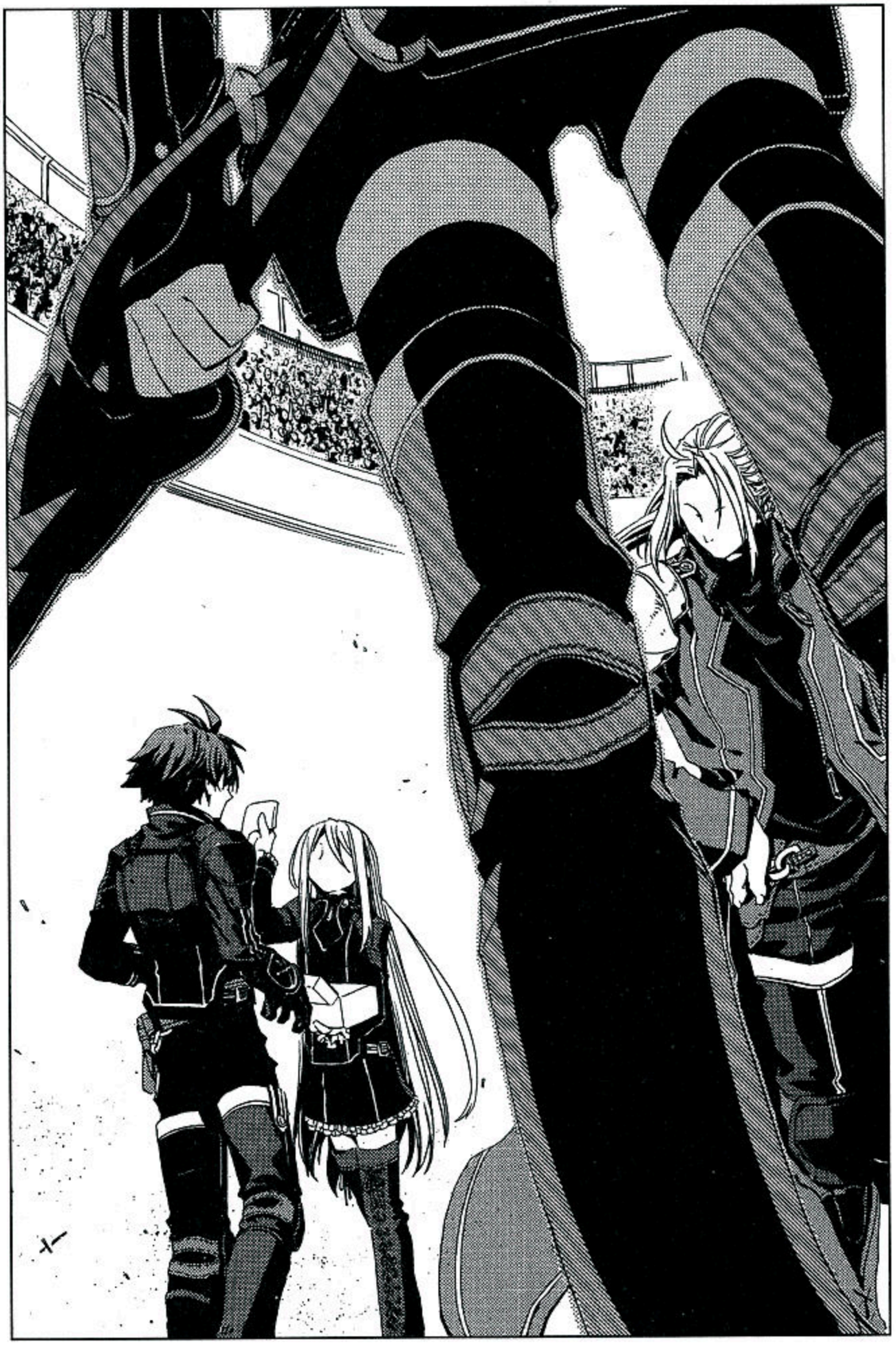
Perhaps she might see him. But.....Was it really her wish to leave this city and see him.....Spaced out, she stood, unable to find an answer to her own question. The weight of the box pulled her into further confusion.

The rest of the Mercenary Gang had disappeared when the dust and sand had cleared. The golden goat.....The Haikizoku had also vanished. The Mercenary Gang had taken Haia and left the field. Nina and her team members had watched their silent departure without stopping them. What they were concerned with was what to do after this match.

(Well, it's useless to think of that.....)

To go against the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang.....The Haikizoku caused this by entering the city by chance. It would take a long time to resolve this problem.

(How come it seems more problems are piling up one after another?)



Nina felt exhausted but she believed the problems could be solved. She could only hang onto that belief, praying that her path towards saving Zuellni wasn't the self-destructive path of Dinn's. She could only hope like that.

With the clearing of the dust and sand, the audience finally saw what happened in the field. No longer bound, Dinn had fallen on the ground. His image showed on the large screen. Anyone could tell the 17th platoon had won. The siren signaling the end of the match rang along with the shouting of the commentator. Dissatisfaction, however, was mixed in with the cheering of the crowd.

"Layfon!"

A small and delicate figure stood beside Layfon, who was putting his Dite back into the weapon harness. Long silvery hair danced behind Felli.

"Are you all right?"

Blood covered half of Layfon's face. Felli was administering treatment.

"I'm fine," he said and pushed her hand away, but she forcefully dabbed at his wound with a disinfected cotton ball. Having no way out, he let her treat his wound.

(Really.....)

Pain invaded Nina's chest as she looked upon that scene. She brushed grains of sand off her stiff hair and lifted her head to look at the sky.

(More problems are piling up.)

Whether it was inside or outside, it was the same with Nina's heart. She ignored the pain inside her and tightened her fist.